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PSYCHONAUTS 2

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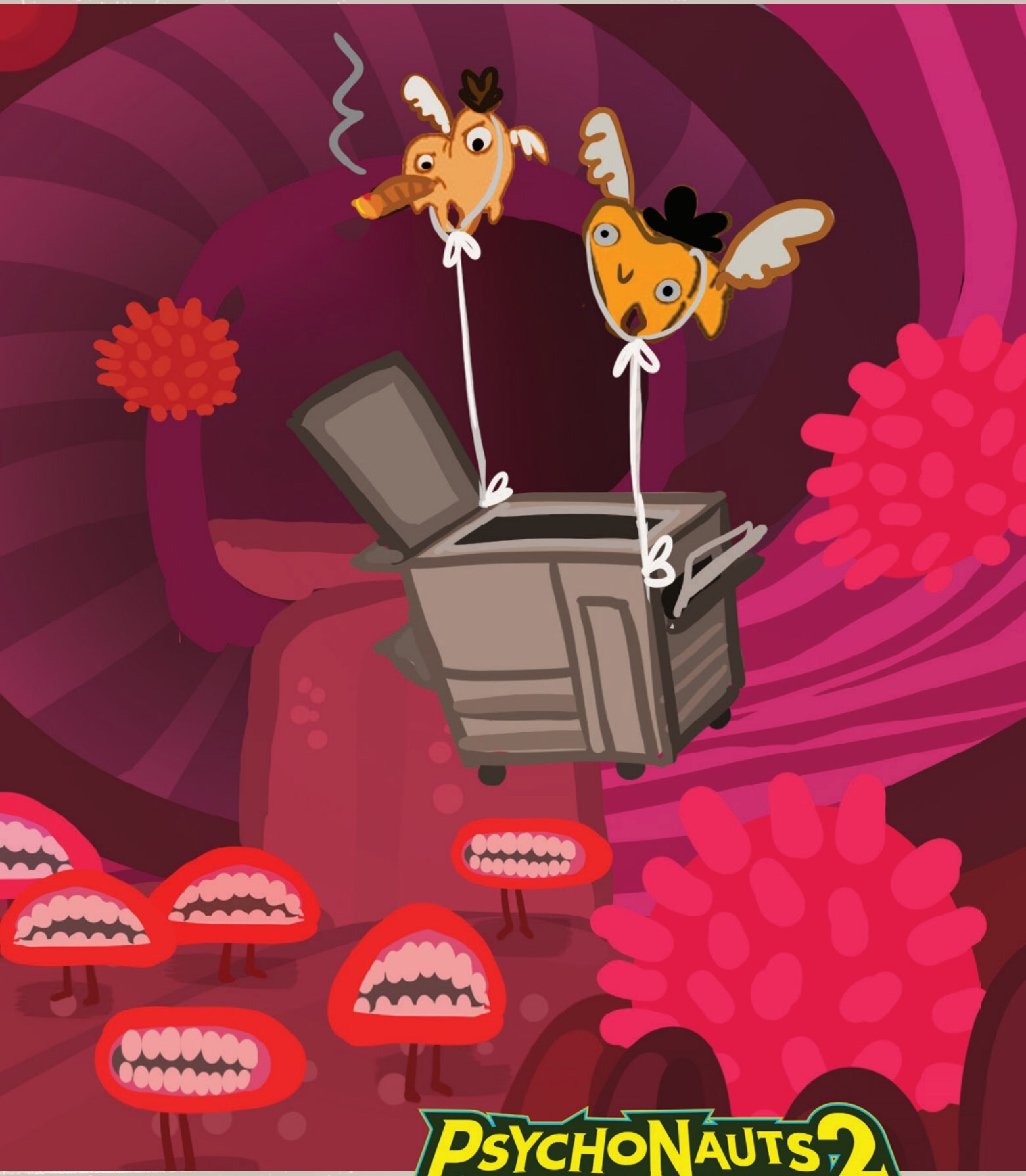

PSYCHONAUTS 2

Exclusive Concept Art

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Twists And Turns

Video games are great vehicles for storytelling, capable of taking us on journeys that can't be achieved in any other medium. We're active participants in these stories, sometimes given the freedom to make our own choices to move the plot in a direction that better suits our beliefs. We develop bonds with our characters, feel like we're in their worlds, and journey with them late into the night to see how their stories conclude.

I couldn't put BioShock down until I figured out what was truly happening. I was blown away by The Last of Us' complex narrative web. I also found one of gaming's best stories in a colorful platformer called Psychonauts. When I began playing this game back in 2005, I anticipated lighthearted action littered with great jokes by well-known game creator Tim Schafer, who had made quite the name for himself with his comedic writing at LucasArts. After a few hours, I put my controller down and walked over to a coworker's desk to tell them this wasn't the game they thought it was. Schafer's humor was still there, but it wasn't the showpiece. The humor melded seamlessly within a brilliantly penned story about the complexities of the human brain. To this day, Psychonauts is home to one of video games' finest narratives.

As dark as it was enlightening, this story fully explored its themes, and completely upended player expectations every step of the way. From the Milkman Conspiracy to the Meat Circus, it delivered some of my favorite moments in gaming. It also ended on a cliffhanger that screamed for a sequel.

We had to wait more than 15 years for it, but Psychonauts 2 is finally almost here. We at *Game Informer* have been trying to do a cover story on this game from the moment we learned it was in development. The stars finally aligned, and we were able to take a deep dive into this highly anticipated game for this month's cover story. This issue also takes you deep into the mind of Schafer, and deeper into the work of Double Fine Productions, a studio that has been at the forefront of most changes in how games are developed and released. This is one of the most complete looks we've ever had for a game and its creative team.

As always, I hope you enjoy the issue, and are happy and safe. Do yourself a favor and play Psychonauts if you haven't already. The Milkman will blow your mind!

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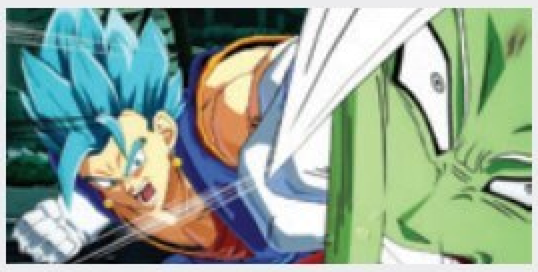

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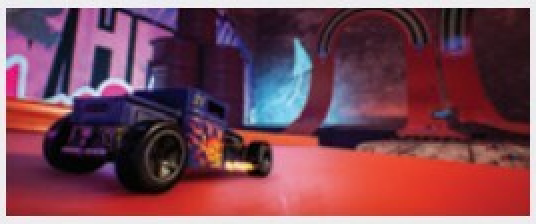

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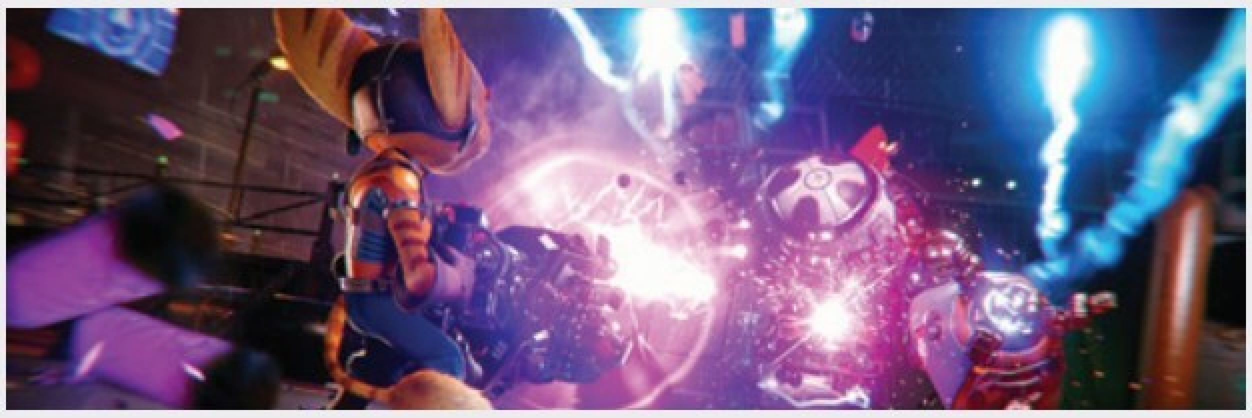

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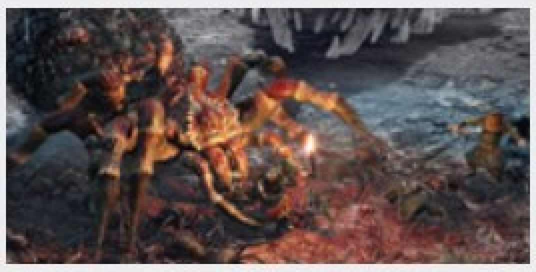

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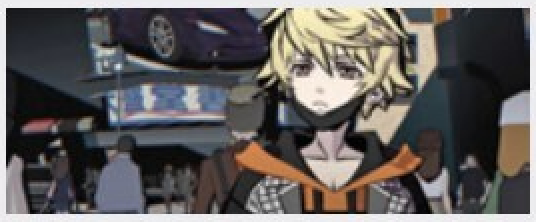

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72 **New Pokémon Snap**
An unlikely sequel, we've played New Pokémon Snap to completion, and we're happy to get our cameras out once more.

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Ethan Winters' story continues. We've finally played Village, and we're ready to tell you whether it's a nightmare worth experiencing.

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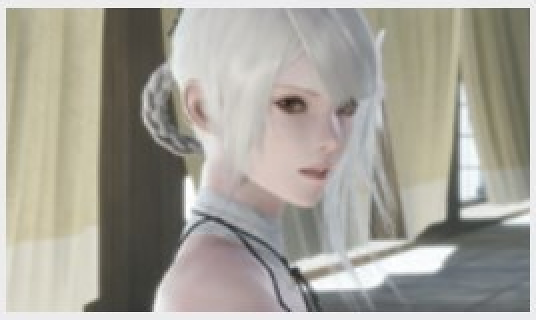
A game controlled by actually, literally blinking, learn more about one of 2021's must-plays.



78 **Nier Replicant**
A rework of the cult-classic, here is our final verdict on whether this is a surreal journey worth taking.

They look ferocious, but inside they're just chicken raised with **no antibiotics ever.**

Tyson

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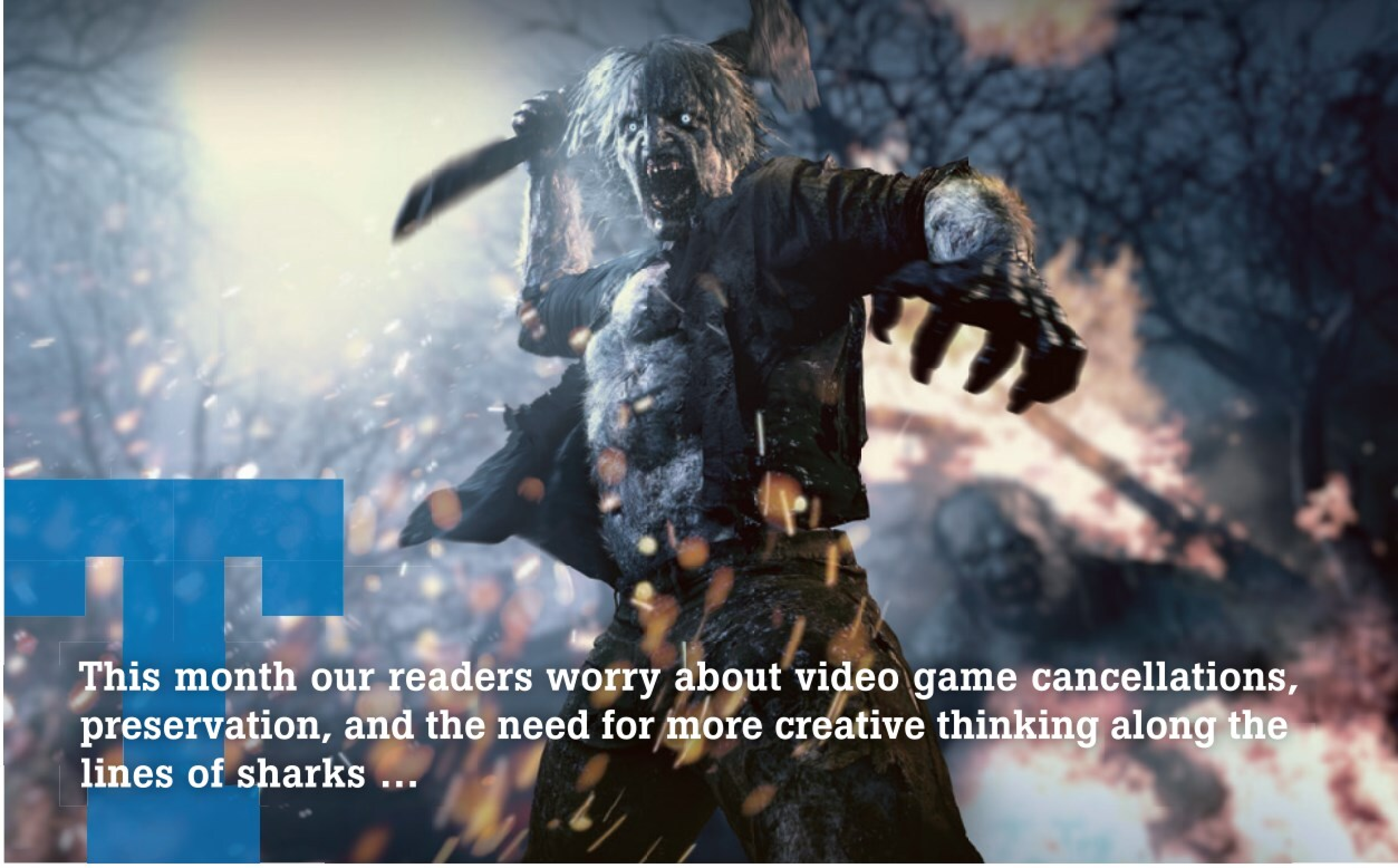


This month our readers worry about video game cancellations, preservation, and the need for more creative thinking along the lines of sharks ...

Resident Evil Village

I love how each installment of Resident Evil continues to expand into different realms of horror. Resident Evil 7 introduced a more intense haunting element, and it looks like Village is veering deep into the territory of wolfwalkers and other creatures from popular horror stories. I know some people think it's a mistake to stray so far from the zombie roots, but I love that I never know what to expect from the sequels. Keep changing things up, Capcom!

Veronica Stewart
Paris, France

Now that we're getting a proper Resident Evil sequel, do you think Capcom's next stop will be making a remake to Resident Evil 4 or would Resident Evil: Code Veronica be next up?

J. Farris
via email

I know *The Walking Dead* was a big deal, and it led to zombies being everywhere in entertainment, but I kinda feel like Resident Evil should be a part of that conversation. My appreciation for the undead started with those games, and is why I showed any kind of interest in *The Walking Dead*. Do you think its importance to the greater world of entertainment is being shortchanged?

Evan Wolfe
via email

We agree that part of Resident Evil's success is how often it changes its skin. Never knowing what could jump out at you next is a huge part of why these games have always been exciting and different. No one thought that a zombie dog would jump through a window or that a giant snake would be near the piano, and those moments became legendary. That formula has been carried forward with almost every installment. If we had to guess, the next remake would be for Resident Evil 4. There are plenty of rumors swirling that it's deep in development already. And if anything deserves credit for the recent zombie surge, it probably is *The Walking Dead*, which was a massive hit, but the Resident Evil franchise (through its games and films) definitely played its role as well and should be recognized.

Far Cry 6

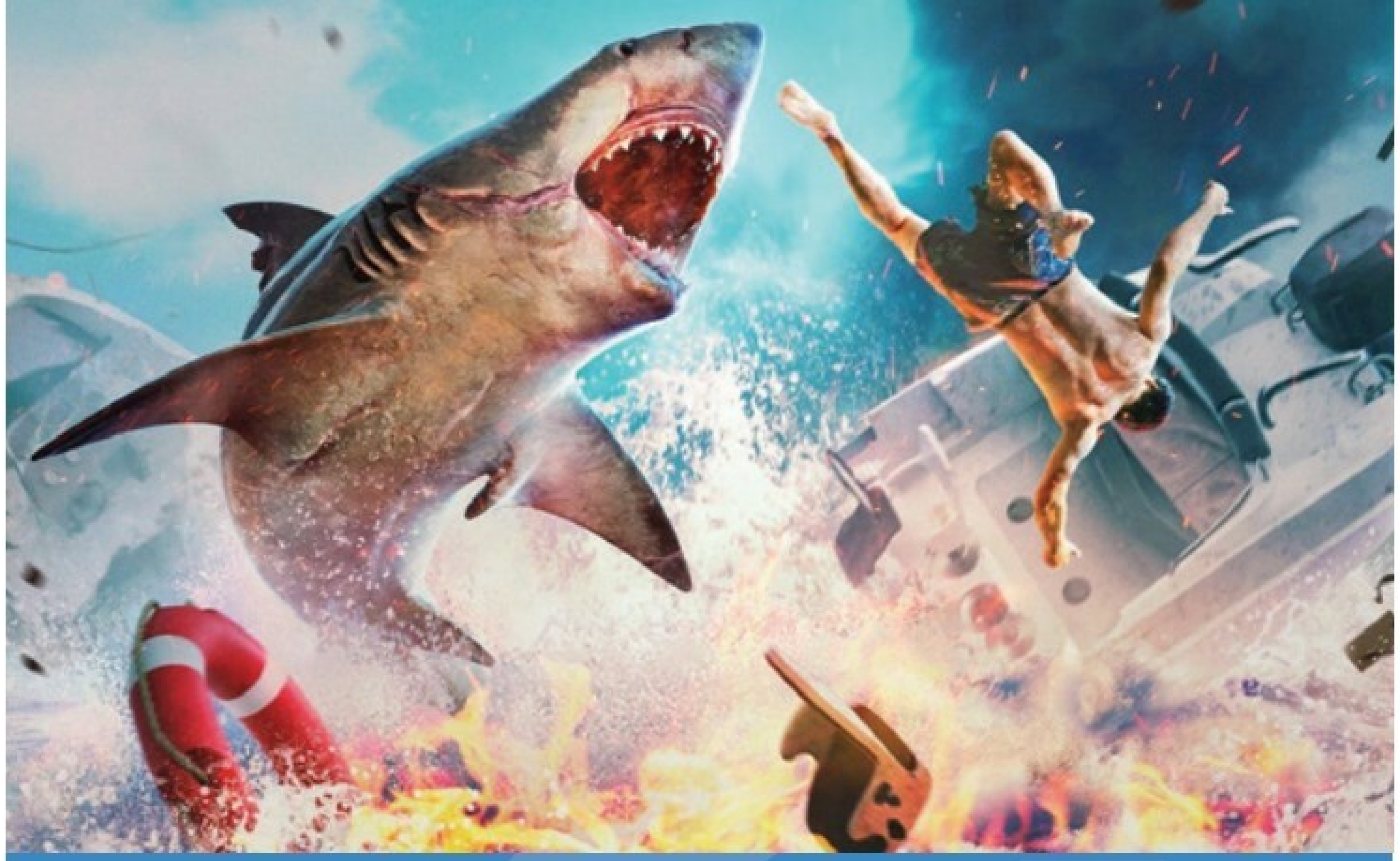
What is going on with Far Cry 6? We have seen nothing since the trailer – no footage or articles on it. The game has been silent. People keep asking me about it. I say I don't know anything. When a game goes silent this long, this means two things: delayed or canceled. Is Ubisoft waiting for E3 to reveal more such as release date and gameplay?

Rocky Johnson
via email

Far Cry 6 is still in development and we will likely hear more on it in the months ahead. The global pandemic has taken its toll on the entertainment industry at large. With the launch of two consoles and the release of dozens of great games in 2020, video games may have seemed to weather the storm better than movies and TV, but behind the scenes, most publishers and developers have experienced setbacks and delays. Far Cry 6 is one of those games that has been pushed back.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!



That Shark Game

Having played nearly every significant game starring a character wielding a gun or axe, I can't begin to tell you just how refreshing it was to play Maneater. You know, the "shark game," as my friends and I lovingly call it. It may seem like a joke game along the lines of Goat Simulator, but it's so much more than that and is actually one of the most well-designed and enjoyable gaming experiences I've had recently. Playing to evolve and grow is such a powerful incentive. Why don't we see more games that take chances on different protagonist types? It seems like developers could do so much with a simple idea like "you play as a deer" as a starting point. Why can't there be a game studio like Pixar that is constantly taking chances with wild ideas?

Cynthia
Silverton, OR

Double Fine Productions, the studio behind Psychonauts 2, has a little bit of Pixar magic in its portfolio. The studio embraces ideas and is willing to roll the dice with each new release. We doubt there will ever be a day where characters with guns and axes don't dominate games, but with each Maneater that is successful, there's a chance for more developers and publishers to take chances. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater gave birth to an entire extreme sports movement, and maybe Maneater can do the same for unexpected viewpoints. Of course, it could just give way to more shark games, which we wouldn't have a problem with.

Video Game Museums

Loved the article on video game museums and preservation in issue 334. I visited the Pinball Hall of Fame in Las Vegas in 2016, and it was a phenomenal experience – not only to see very old childhood memories, but be able to play them! As mobile gaming advances, the youth of tomorrow might never understand the legacies that their games were founded upon without a passion for the history of gaming.

Todd
Indianapolis, IN

***Game Informer* cares deeply about video game preservation, and has worked closely with numerous historians to ensure the game industry's foundation is protected. There are dozens of museums around the globe that have taken an interest in video games, including The Strong National Museum of Play in New York that has an extensive collection of games, spanning from the 1970s to today. Texas' National Video Game Museum also takes visitors on a guided tour through the consoles and hardware oddities of yesteryear, complete with hands-on opportunities.**

Game Demos

Hello *Game Informer*! In the year where E3 is going all-digital and video game demos seem to be tracking a lot more attention in the last 12 months (Resident Evil Village, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1+2), would it be safe to say that publishers and developers will be having some available during the event? You can not ignore that, despite still being perceived by many to be a gathering for gaming journalists and insiders, E3 has been more open to everyone than ever before in the last decade, and 2021 is the best time to be all-inclusive. Demos would help keep the essence of E3 alive (without the long lines), otherwise, I feel it'd be a missed opportunity for these companies. It would end up feeling like any other gaming digital event like a State of Play or Nintendo Direct. Given the expo's history, do you think that these demos (if any) should be made available only to said industry insiders?

Roly
Omaha, NE

Not to be difficult, but our answer is both "yes" and "no." It really comes down to the demo, how confident the developer and publisher are in its quality, and if it would even be feasible on a large public scale. A demo hitting at E3 sounds awesome, and could be a great way to show off a section of an amazing game and make people think about E3 again, but if it's buggy or runs into server issues, that could sour excitement for a game that may be a ways off. We hope we see some at E3, and more in the future in general. When done right, they are a great way of showing off why a game matters.

Crossovers

The number of different entertainment franchises that have crossed over into Fortnite and Smash Bros. is amazing. They are almost becoming cultural hubs that have something for everyone. Do you think these games are better because they are expanding into other universes, or are losing their way and are no longer about the core Nintendo experience for Smash Bros. and the unique story that Fortnite has established?

Cameron Lucina
via email

The focus of Smash Bros. is to unite universes. While some of the Nintendo charm has been lost in the most recent iterations, the expansions into new realms are often celebrated. Getting to play as Joker from Persona 5, Banjo & Kazooie from the old Nintendo 64 games, and Steve and Alex from Minecraft are great additions that fit right in. Fortnite's constant dabbling with other brands has been done in clever ways within the game's ongoing story, but does sometimes come across as a marketing opportunity for an upcoming film. That said, the game is about individual player expression, and being able to play as Wolverine with a pet dog strapped to his back, or Master Chief with Captain America's shield is nothing short of awesome.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"This may seem like a silly question, and I know I can configure my controller to fit my preferences, but I still wonder why there isn't a universally designated Jump button?"

It should be the A button. We will ask President Biden if he can make this a law in the United States.

"Whatever happened to Netflix offering interactive shows? I was kind of into how Minecraft worked on there."

It was an interesting experiment that seemed like it had potential to take off, but it appears that's all we're getting for now. Until they make a comeback, there are plenty of great choice-driven games to play!

"When will Sony and Microsoft put out enough consoles so they will no longer be profitable for the scalpers?"

While it may seem like consoles are in short supply, both Sony and Microsoft are hitting record sales for the number of units sold. The demand is far greater than it has been, which could create a problem of supply and scalping for many months to come.

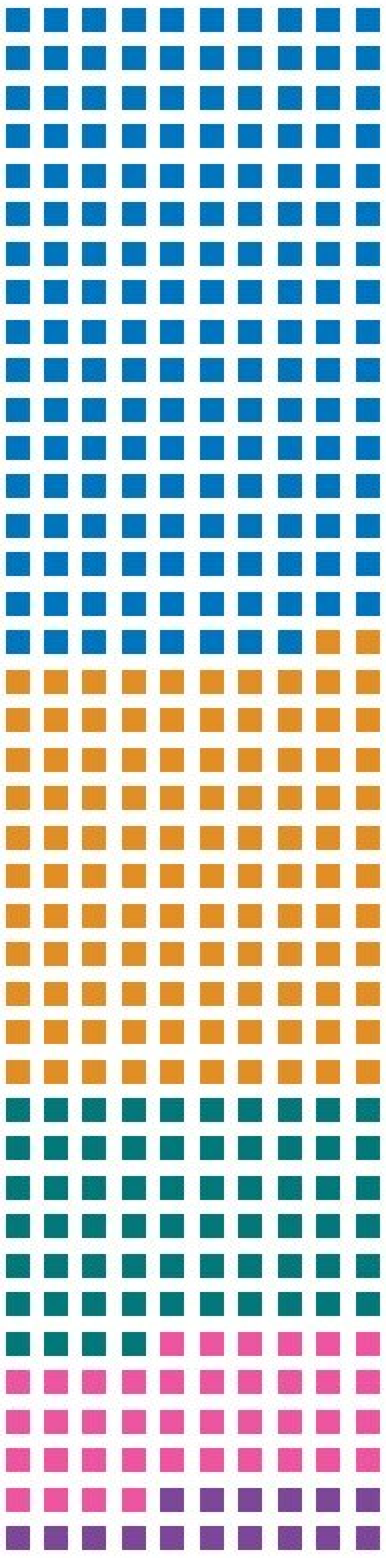
Best Comment:

"Please for the life of all that is holy give Double Fine a cover for Psychonauts 2! The world needs to know about that game!"

Question Of The Month:

What game has your favorite story?

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Are still looking for new-gen machines
- 🟧 Have upgraded to new-gen machines
- 🟩 Love how more games utilize console-to-console crossplay
- 🟥 Are obsessed with Pringles' Halo-inspired Wavy Moa Burger flavor
- 🟪 Are confused by non-fungible tokens (NFTs)

Video Games = Saturday Morning Cartoons

I'm a 40-year-old father of three children who want to go toy shopping every weekend. Is it just me, or are video games the new Saturday morning cartoon when it comes to toys? Rather than seeing *Thundercats* or *M.A.S.K.* toys, we now have sections dedicated to Fortnite, Roblox, Minecraft, Sonic, Pokémon, Mario, and more. Video games are taking over. Why the sudden shift away from TV and original brands to games?

Shane Bryant
Princeton, IL

As many *GI* staffers who also happen to be parents can attest, kids don't sit in front of the TV like we used to. They spend more time on their iPads consuming bite-sized shows on YouTube Kids. Many of those shows are of influencers playing the game series you mentioned. Those series are also rich in content, allowing for wave after wave of action figures and toys. Even the big, established brands like Lego and Nerf are heavily invested in games. You are totally right in your comparison: For toys, games are the new Saturday morning cartoon!

Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers what game they'd most like to see on new-generation machines. Here are their picks …

One of the games I would most like to see announced for next-generation consoles is a new, party-based Star Wars RPG. The Knights of the Old Republic games are great, and I would love to see what could be done with a game like that on modern hardware. However, I would settle for the rumored remake of KOTOR or The Old Republic getting released on consoles, a tall order for that style of MMO, but a guy can hope.

Xeno Phi XIII
Missouri

I'd love to see a new Godzilla game. I never got to play the 2014 game, and now I can't find it anywhere (not for a price I can afford, anyway). The MonsterVerse is ripe with potential for a great game. Perhaps an updated version of Destroy All Monsters Melee?

Anonymous
via email

The next Witcher game! Even with The Witcher 3 being the end of Geralt's story, who is to say that they couldn't make a game set in the middle or beginning of his story? Or why not have a different protagonist altogether? It certainly worked for Thronebreaker. Heck, there is so much unexplored lore in that IP that through all Witcher media, they've maybe shown 1/8th of the world, if that.

ThenThomWasLike
Redmond, WA

I am really hoping for a Darksiders 4 announcement. Love the franchise and want to see it finished.

Enoch Brooks
St. Louis, MO

I would love to see Eternal Darkness brought back for the next gen. I remember losing myself in the game when it was first released on the GameCube. Would any of your current staff like to see Eternal Darkness make a return or at the very least be remade or remastered?

Tim S.
South Carolina

WINNER

1 Kayla Sprankle

Legends say the key to understanding Kingdom Hearts' lore sits atop Hollow Bastion's twisting towers.

2 Curt Thomas, Jr.

The Knight quietly ponders if they're all they're cracked up to be.

3 Skylar Akers

We won't rest until the Wind Fish is correctly reclassified as the "Wind Whale."

4 Tyler Nelson

This zombie is just making sure Leon's heart is in the right place – before tearing it out.

5 Casey Reed-Massey

This makes us want to see Winston star in a Magilla Gorilla revival.

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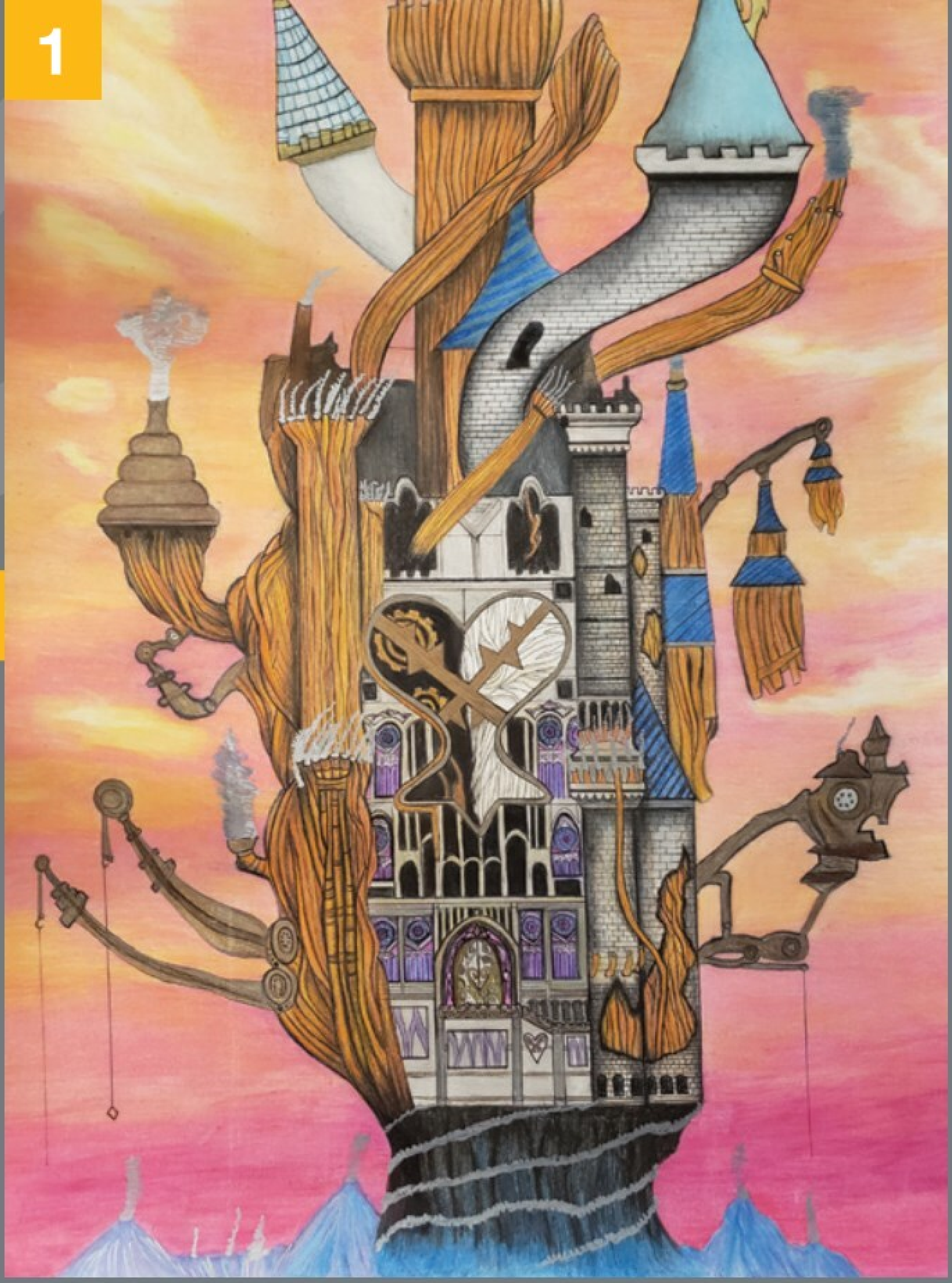

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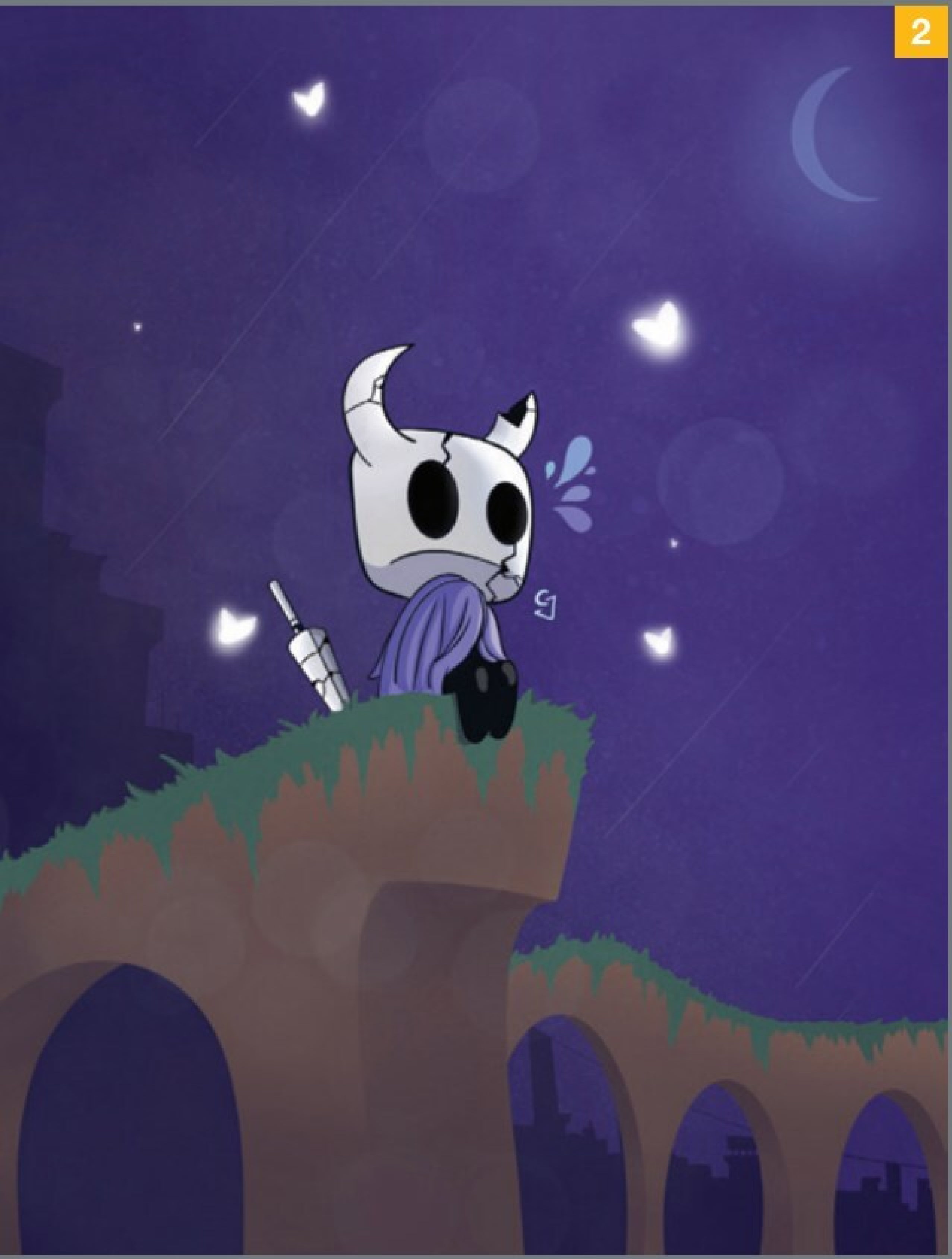

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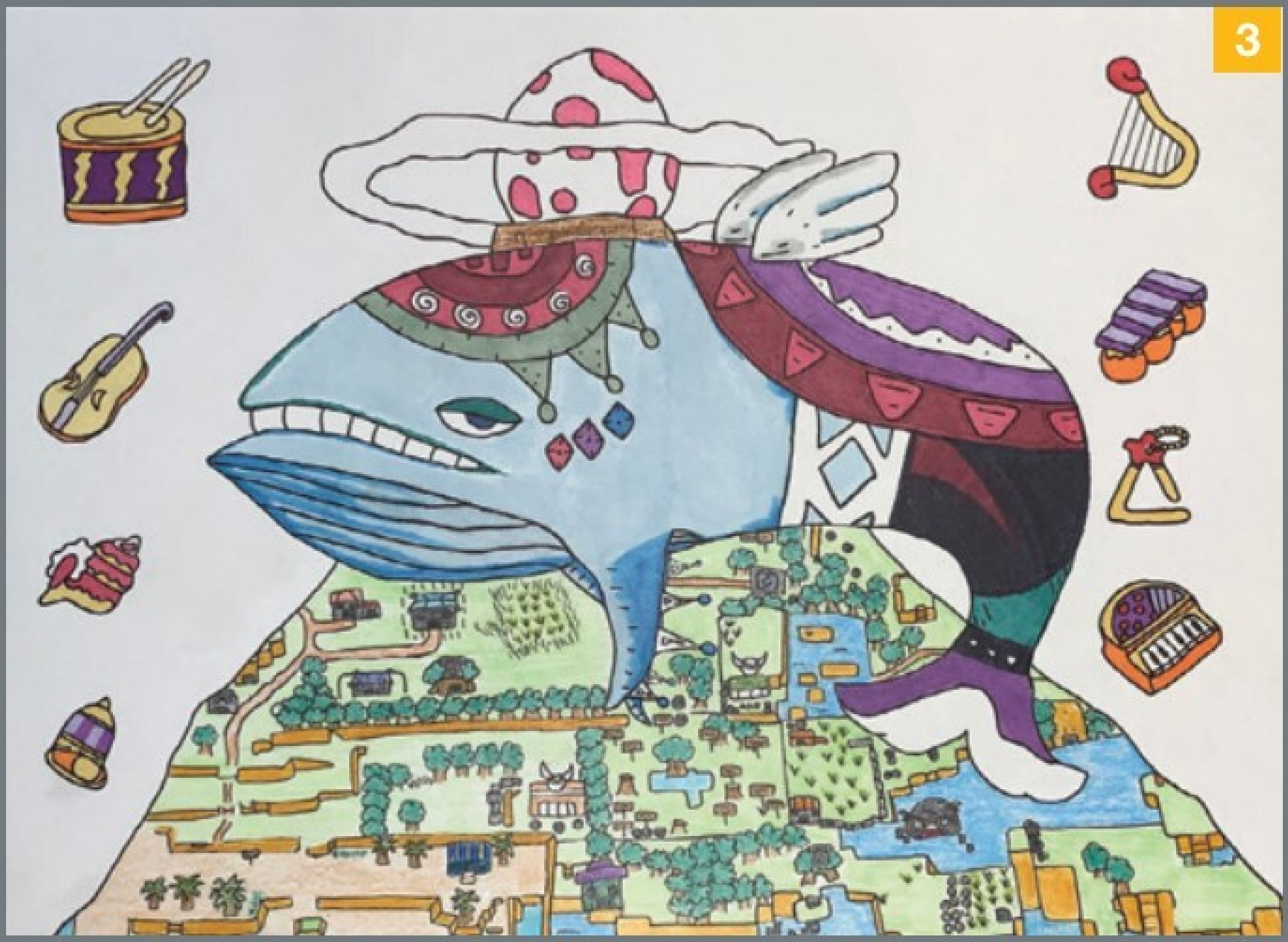

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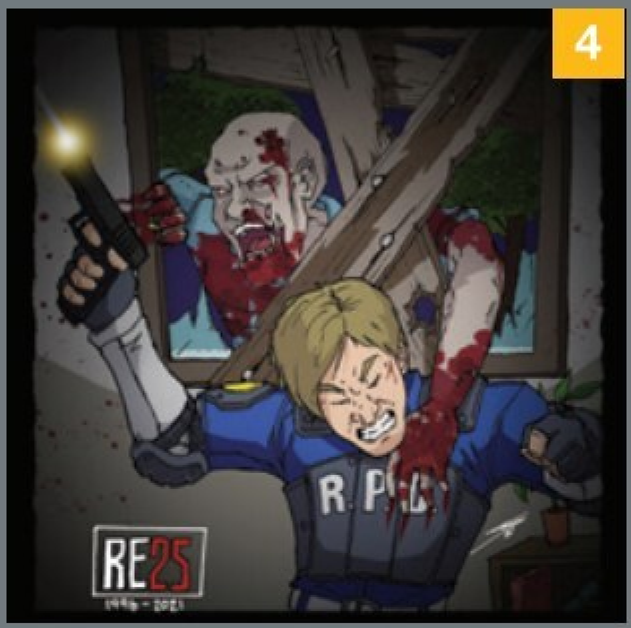

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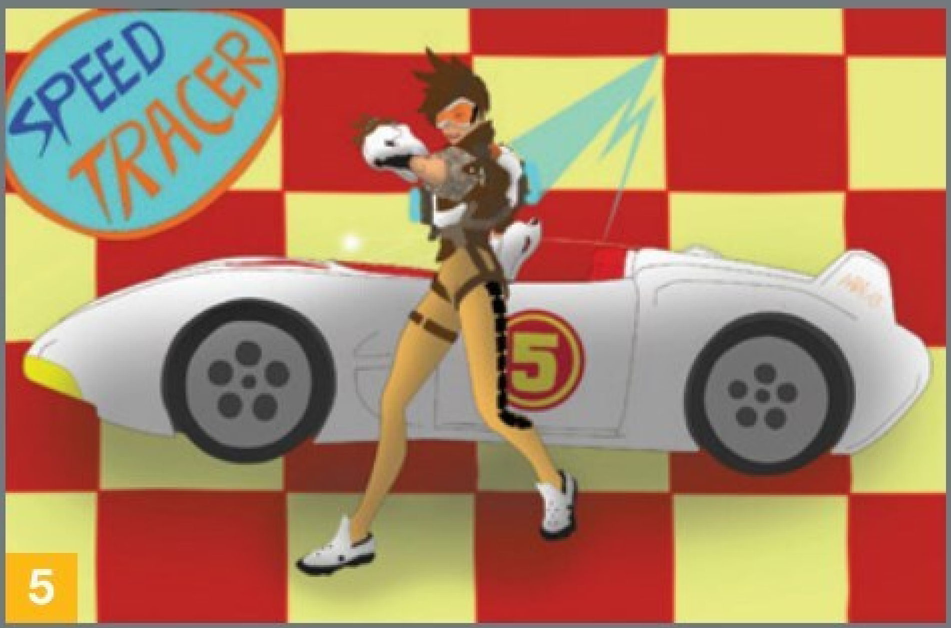

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DORMANT FRANCHISES THAT NEED A NEW-GEN REVIVAL

A new generation of consoles usually signals the arrival of new franchises bringing fresh ideas and never-before-seen experiences. That's all well and good, but at the same time we can't help but pine for the return of sidelined franchises that could benefit from a new-gen facelift.

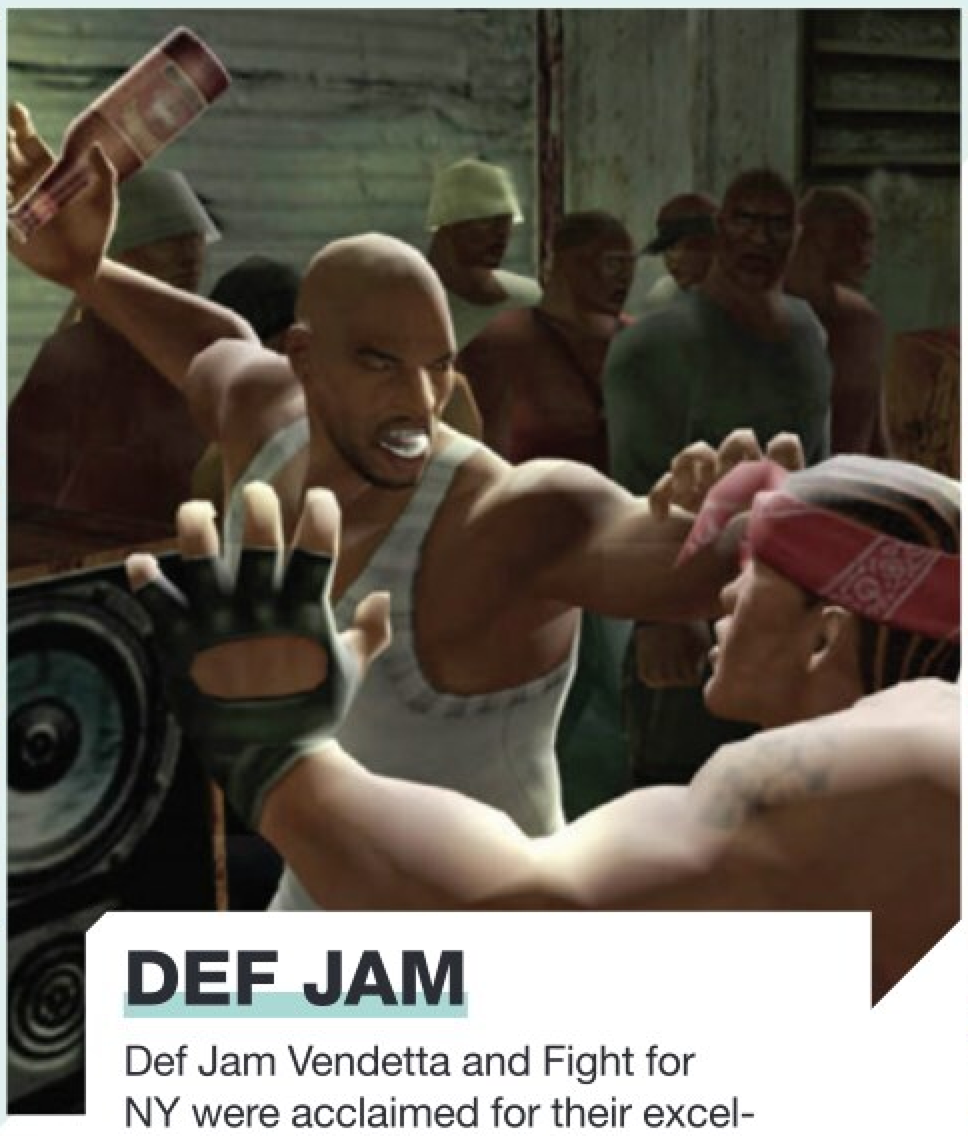
The previous generation treated players to revivals of classic series such as Doom, Wolfenstein, Crash Bandicoot, Streets of Rage, and even King's Quest. Those titles came back better than ever, but there are still plenty of other franchises that haven't made a peep since at least the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 era. Now that the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S are out, it's time to start dusting off off these long-lost favorites.

Narrowing down a list of worthy franchises wasn't easy. To keep things interesting, we avoided only filling it up with sure-fire classics or beating dead horses that, as far as we can tell, simply won't return anytime soon (like Jak & Daxter or Castlevania). Some of those marquee names are present, but we prioritized less-obvious-but-still-beloved franchises that we hope will awaken from hibernation.

/// ***by Marcus Stewart***

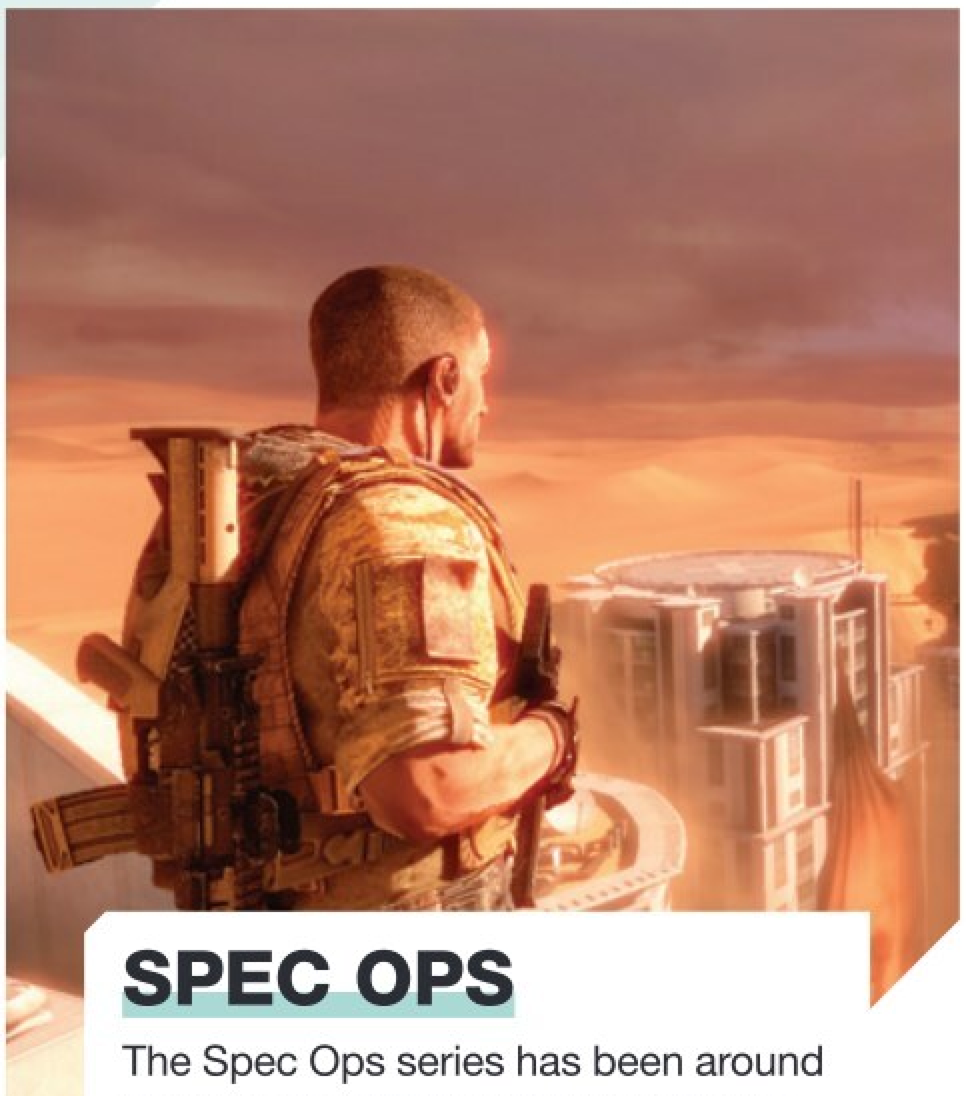
TWISTED METAL

Twisted Metal used to be a PlayStation staple and led the charge for the now-virtually extinct car combat subgenre. The last entry was released in 2012, and while it was a solid return, it didn't signal a renaissance for the series like fans hoped. We think Twisted Metal's brand of fun could still be a riot today. If nothing else, it seems tailor-made for the live-service treatment. Though not exactly the same, modern titles such as Destruction AllStars, Wreckfest, and Onrush have proven there's still a place for goofy, destruction-focused vehicle games.



DEF JAM

Def Jam Vendetta and Fight for NY were acclaimed for their excellent blend of fighting and wrestling mechanics (created with the famed AKI wrestling engine, used first for WWF No Mercy). The final game, 2007's Def Jam: Icon, didn't make the same amount of noise, but we think enough time has passed that a new entry could step up. The roster could include legacy acts like Nas, Big Sean, and LL Cool J, but we're most excited for the wealth of contemporary talent that've joined the Def Jam label since Icon's release. It'd be great to step into the ring as 2Chainz, Logic, or, for a fun curveball, K-Pop group BTS.



SPEC OPS

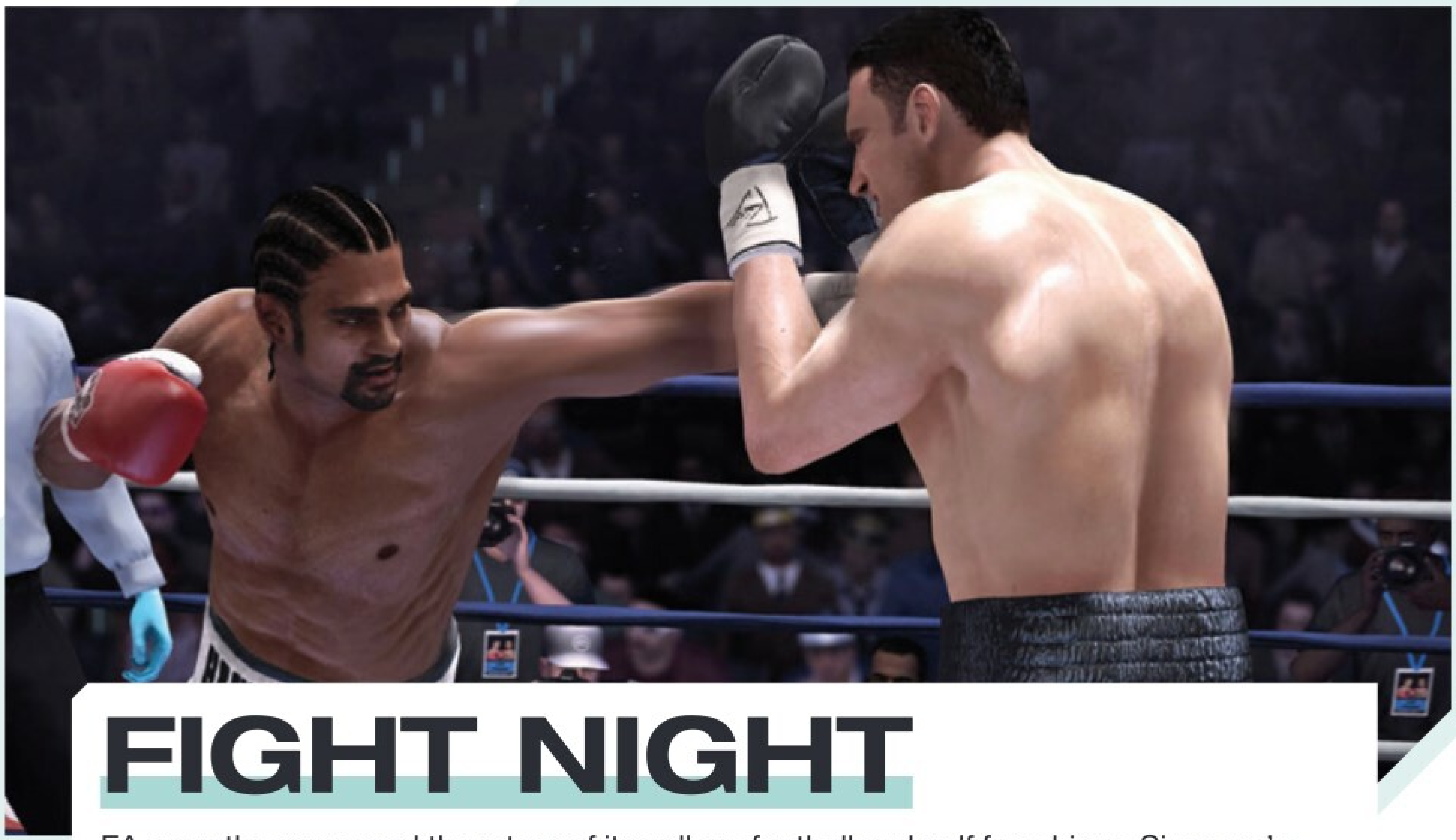
The Spec Ops series has been around since the late '90s, but it wasn't until 2012's Spec Ops: The Line that it finally became more than just "the bargain-bin shooter." The game told an excellently written story challenging the morality of war, drawing heavy inspiration from stories like *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. The squad focused gameplay was serviceable at best but fighting through blinding sandstorms and making difficult choices that influenced the effectiveness of your crew offered exciting twists to the action. We're begging to see a follow-up that maintains the quality writing while refining the gameplay.

NBA STREET

EA has repeatedly tried and failed to compete with NBA 2K with its maligned NBA Live series. It was clear a long time ago it couldn't beat 2K at making a pure basketball sim, so why not go the opposite route and revisit the more arcade-style NBA Street? The beloved franchise moved the action from the arenas to the blacktop and offered a more simplified, over-the-top take on basketball. NBA Street was celebrated by NBA diehards and non-fans alike, but we haven't received a proper entry since 2007's Homecourt. It'd be nice to have a fun, goofy basketball game to complement 2K's yearly simulation offerings.

F.E.A.R.

F.E.A.R. 3 tied up the series, but it's been 10 years since that game's debut. That qualifies it for at least the reboot treatment. F.E.A.R. stood out by harmoniously combining unnerving psychological horror with bombastic first-person shooting; it was as if James Wan and Michael Bay collaborated on a game. Monolith Productions, which developed the first two, better received F.E.A.R. games, has been largely quiet since releasing Middle-earth: Shadow of War in 2017. Could the studio be laying the groundwork for Alma's big return? Probably not, but we'd love to see it.



FIGHT NIGHT

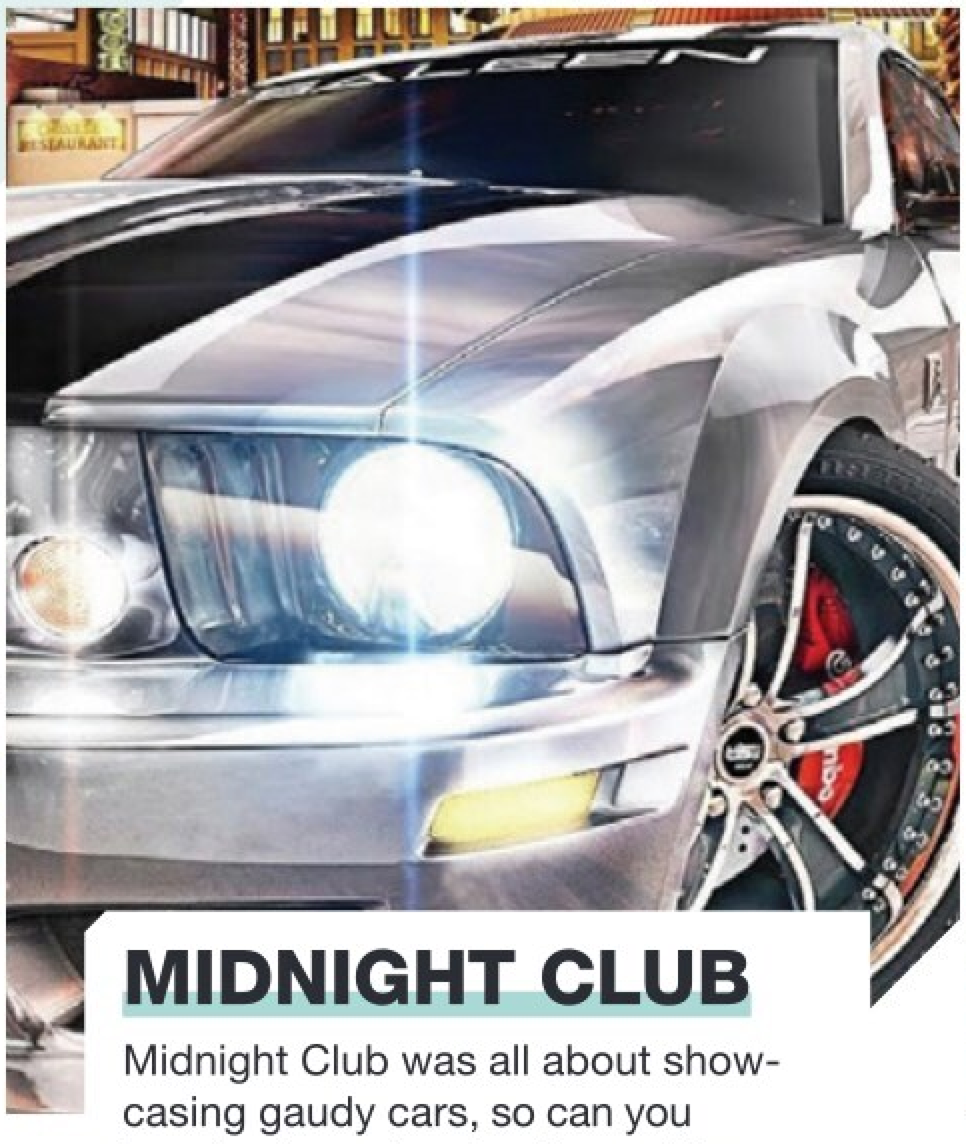
EA recently announced the return of its college football and golf franchises. Since we're bringing sports games back from the dead, how about reviving the boxing series Fight Night? There was a time when Fight Night was the premier boxing sim in town thanks to its realistic gameplay and, at the time, mind-blowing graphics. The last entry in the series, 2011's Fight Night Champion, took it a step further by adding a fantastic single-player campaign that remains one of the most celebrated story modes in sports games. Boxing may not be as popular as it once was, but enough interest remains for the series to get back on its feet before being counted out.

DINO CRISIS

Hey Capcom, remember how you reinvented the Resident Evil series with Biohazard and Village? Can you just do that again, but with Dino Crisis? How about remaking the PS1 entries in the RE Engine à la Resident Evil 2 and 3? When it comes to a new Dino Crisis, those are the two approaches that we're most interested in seeing happen. Given Capcom's stellar track record as of late, we're confident it could revive the series from extinction.

X-MEN LEGENDS

We know what you're thinking: "Marvel: Ultimate Alliance is the same game but gives you every Marvel hero. Why go back to just the X-Men?" Thing is, X-Men's fiction has always been vast enough to fill its own game; look at the two previous Legends titles for proof. There are still plenty of cool mutants we'd love to control that likely won't be highlighted in a broader catch-all like Ultimate Alliance. Plus, anyone that's read X-Men stories post-*House of X*/*Powers of X* knows that the mutant world has changed dramatically. We'd love to see the current state of the mutants adapted into a new brawler.

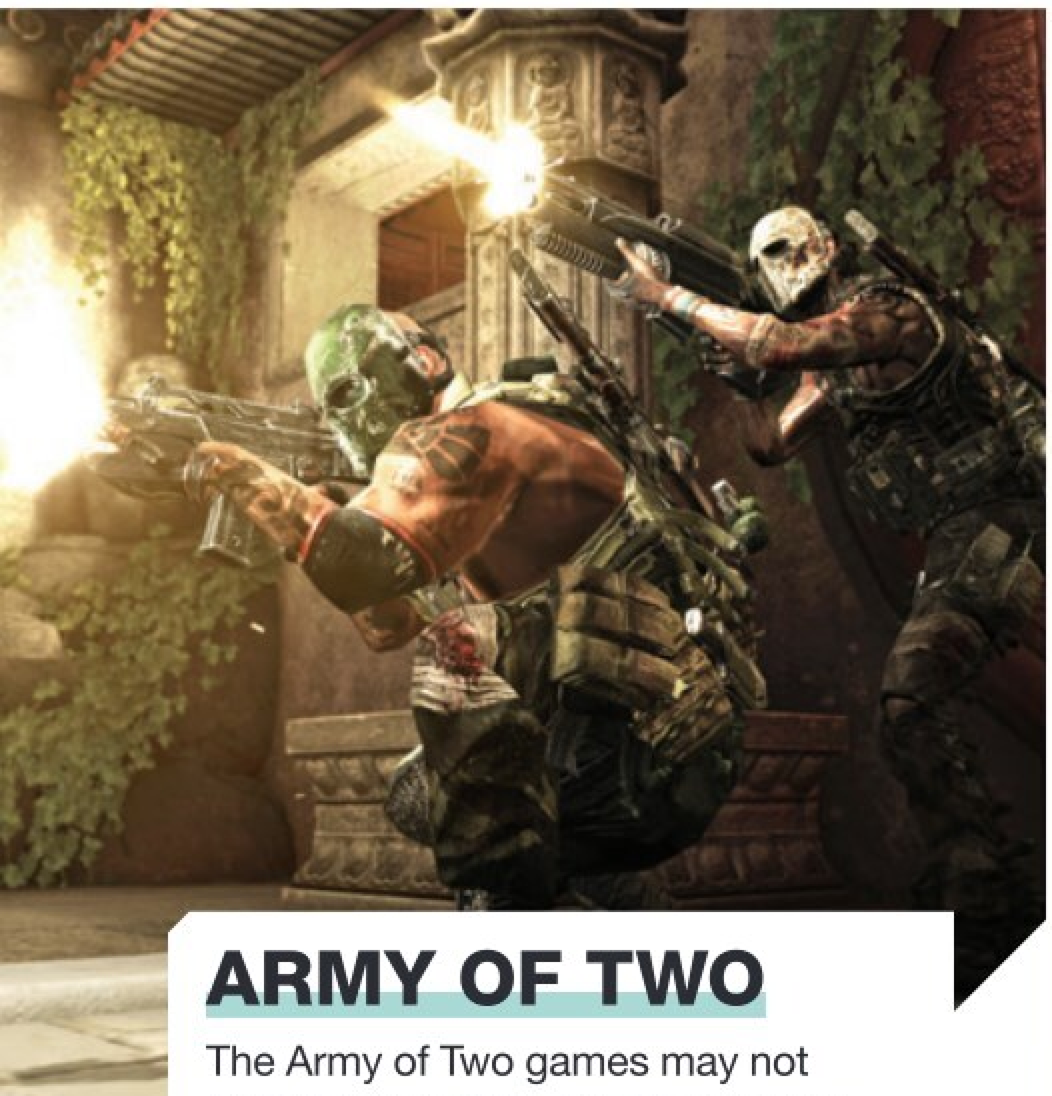


MIDNIGHT CLUB

Midnight Club was all about showcasing gaudy cars, so can you imagine how stunning those rides would look using today's technology? It also helps that hopping behind the wheel of this series has always been a blast. The racing scene needs more quality triple-A titles that aren't a new Forza or (if the planets align correctly) Gran Turismo. We understand Rockstar has little reason to kickstart anything that isn't a new GTA or Red Dead game given those titles' massive success. Still, we miss blasting a hot soundtrack while tearing up some late-night street races.

NINJA GAIDEN

Ninja Gaiden 1 and 2 were among the most brutally-difficult-yet-deliciously-satisfying action games of their time. Unfortunately, the polarizing Ninja Gaiden 3 ended the stellar series with a whimper instead of a bang. Team Ninja has since moved on to craft the fantastic Nioh series and has already alluded that its next projects have nothing to do with Ninja Gaiden. Still, we hope the upcoming Ninja Gaiden: Master Collection makes enough noise to entice the studio into giving Ryu Hayabusa another stab at greatness. Who wouldn't want to slice and dice demons at 60 or even 120 frames-per-second?

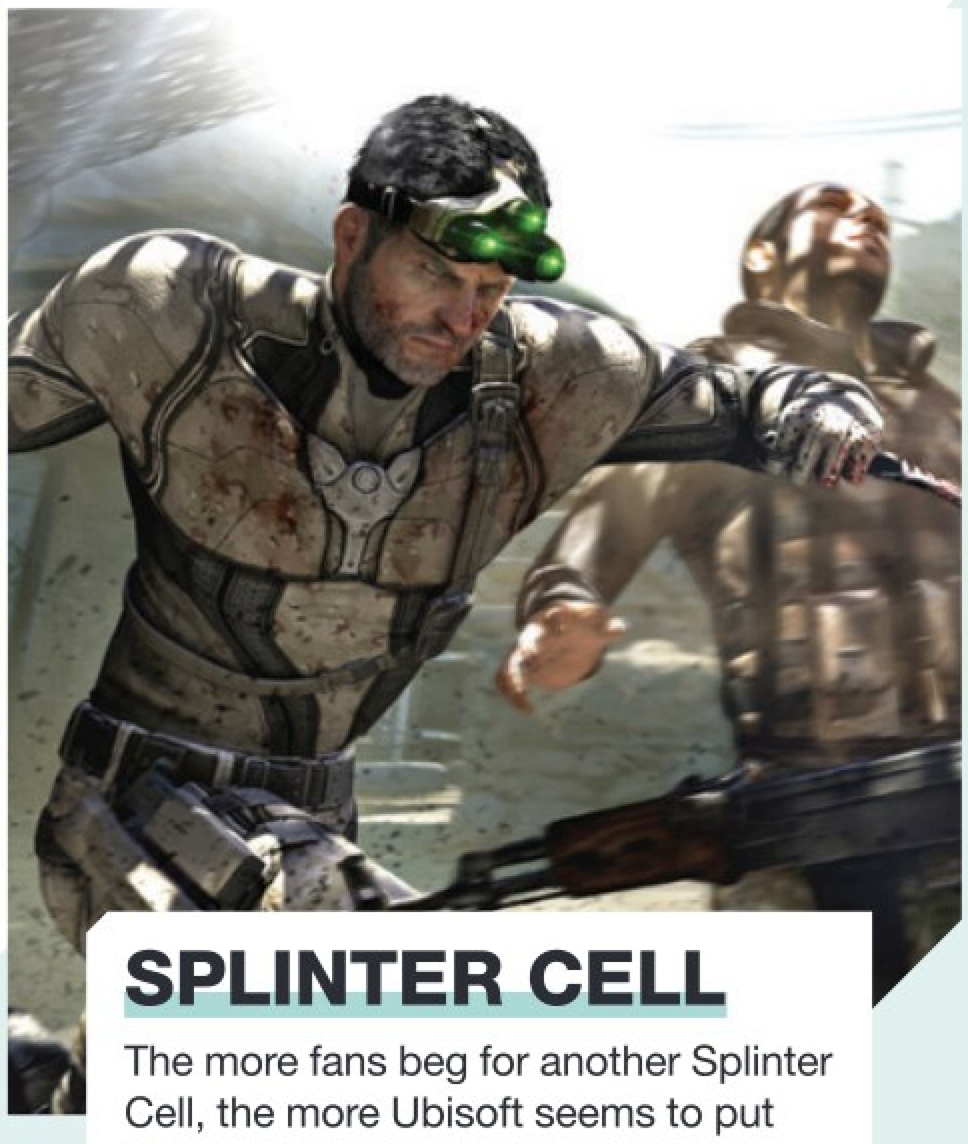


ARMY OF TWO

The Army of Two games may not have been perfect, but they served as enjoyable "check your brain at the door" co-op shooters worth re-examining. While a new entry that addresses the shortcomings of the trilogy would be ideal, our dream scenario is that EA hands Army of Two over to Hazelight, the team behind co-op focused titles It Takes Two and A Way Out. The studio has proven its worth when it comes to concocting wildly inventive two-player mechanics. Imagine what it could do to shake up Army of Two.

LEGACY OF KAIN

Sadly, the most visibility this series gets anymore is appearing on lists such as this one. Fans agree that the dark fantasy of Blood Omen combined with the soul-sucking gameplay of Soul Reaver would be as much of a winning combination today as it was in the '90s/early '00s. Unfortunately, outside of a failed spiritual follow-up in the form of the cancelled MMO Nosgoth, Kain and Raziel have been left to rot in obscurity. Whether Square Enix tasks Crystal Dynamics with making a new entry or, in our whimsical fantasy world, FromSoftware is handed the reins (think about it), we just want Legacy of Kain to rise from the ashes.



SPLINTER CELL

The more fans beg for another Splinter Cell, the more Ubisoft seems to put Sam Fisher in everything except a new entry. There was a time when the series was among the industry's graphical powerhouses thanks to its superb lighting; who says it can't be again with HDR powering it? The real question, though, is if a new entry should return to the hardcore stealth of the original trilogy or lean further into the action-focused style that began with the well-received Splinter Cell: Conviction. Our answer: Yes.

VIEWTIFUL JOE

Capcom has been on a roll the past few years thanks to the massive successes of Resident Evil and Monster Hunter. How about we continue that trend by giving its resident superhero another chance to save the day? The Viewtiful Joe games were fantastic side-scrolling beat 'em ups, and the series' flashy, fast-paced action would pop even more in 4K at 60 frames-per-second. If that's out of the question, can we at least get ports of the first two games? Please?

DEAD SPACE

Dead Space was arguably the premier horror franchise of the PS3/Xbox 360 generation and for good reason. The series successfully homed in on sci-fi horror seen in films like *Alien* while injecting its own fascinating fiction and satisfying dismemberment-focused combat. Unfortunately, Dead Space 3 didn't hit the same highs and developer Visceral Games shut down in 2017. Dead Space creator Glen Schofield has since moved on to form his own studio to make a new sci-fi horror title, The Callisto Protocol. EA has a penchant for allowing its dormant IPs to languish, but we hope someone there is willing to give this amazing series another look. ◆

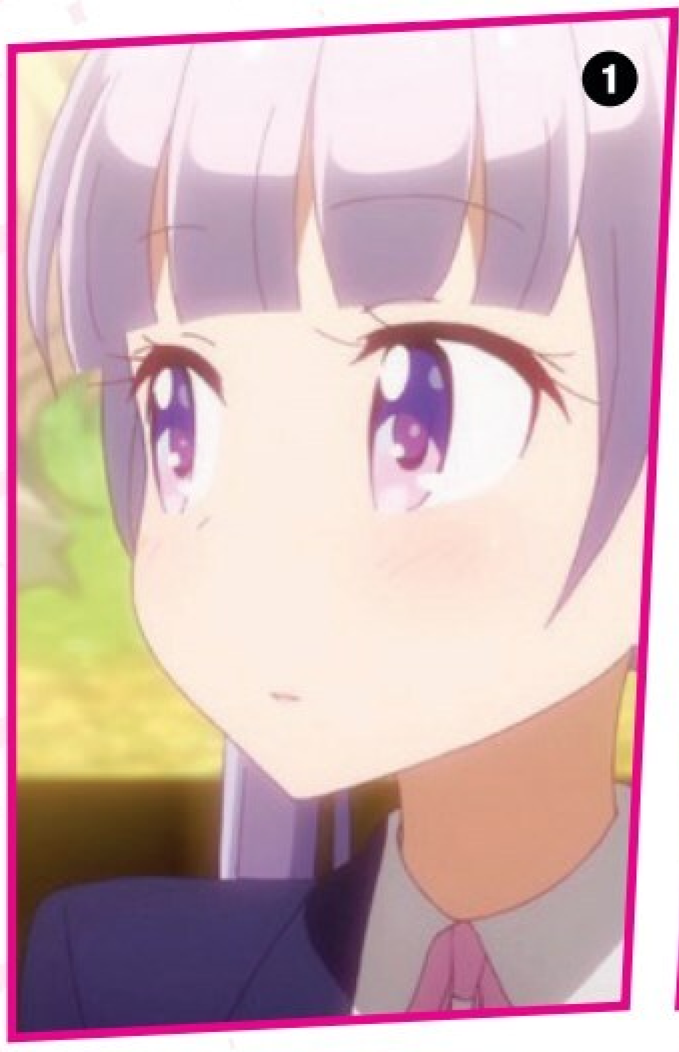
ANIME FOR GAMERS

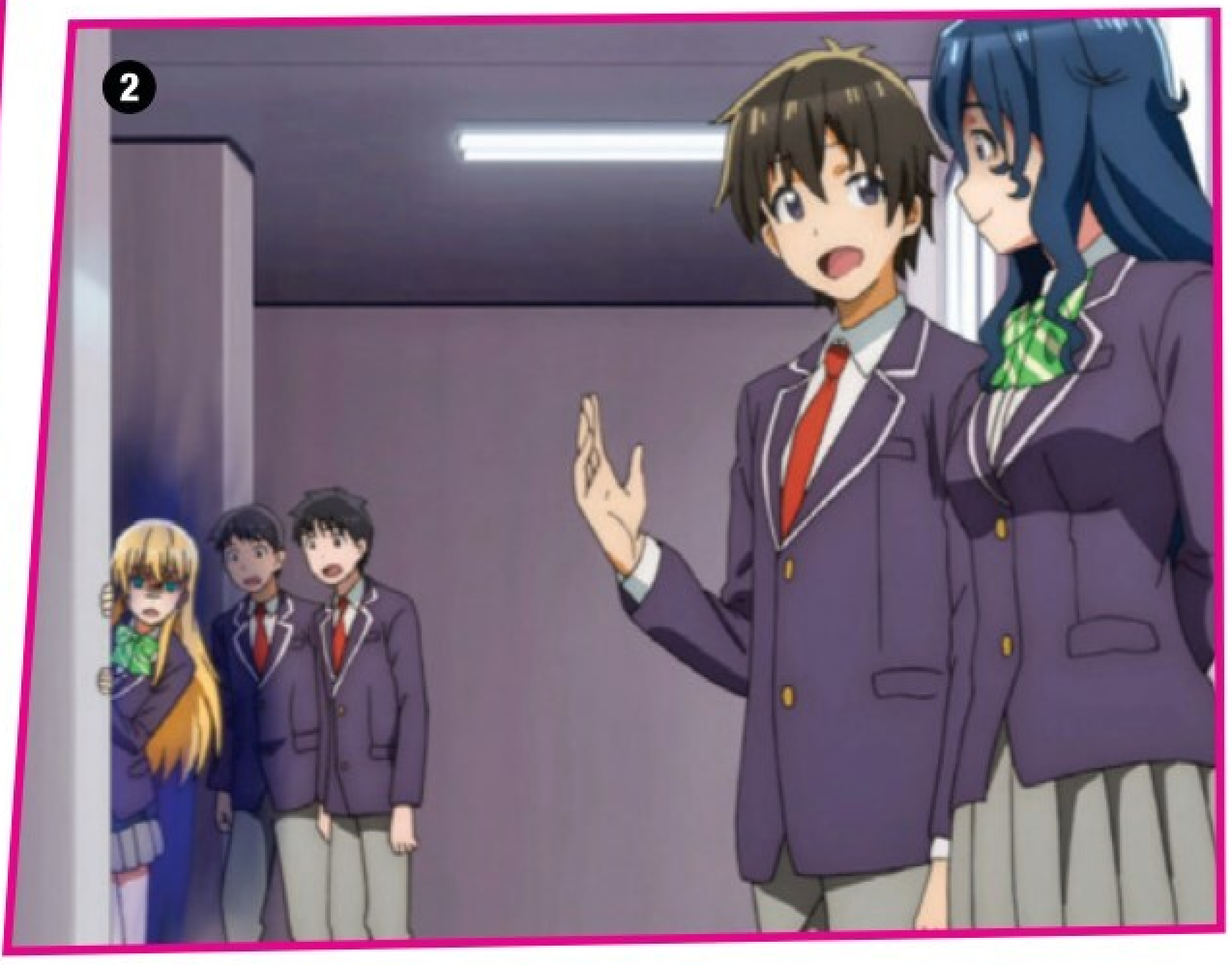
Experience your hobby in beautifully animated stories

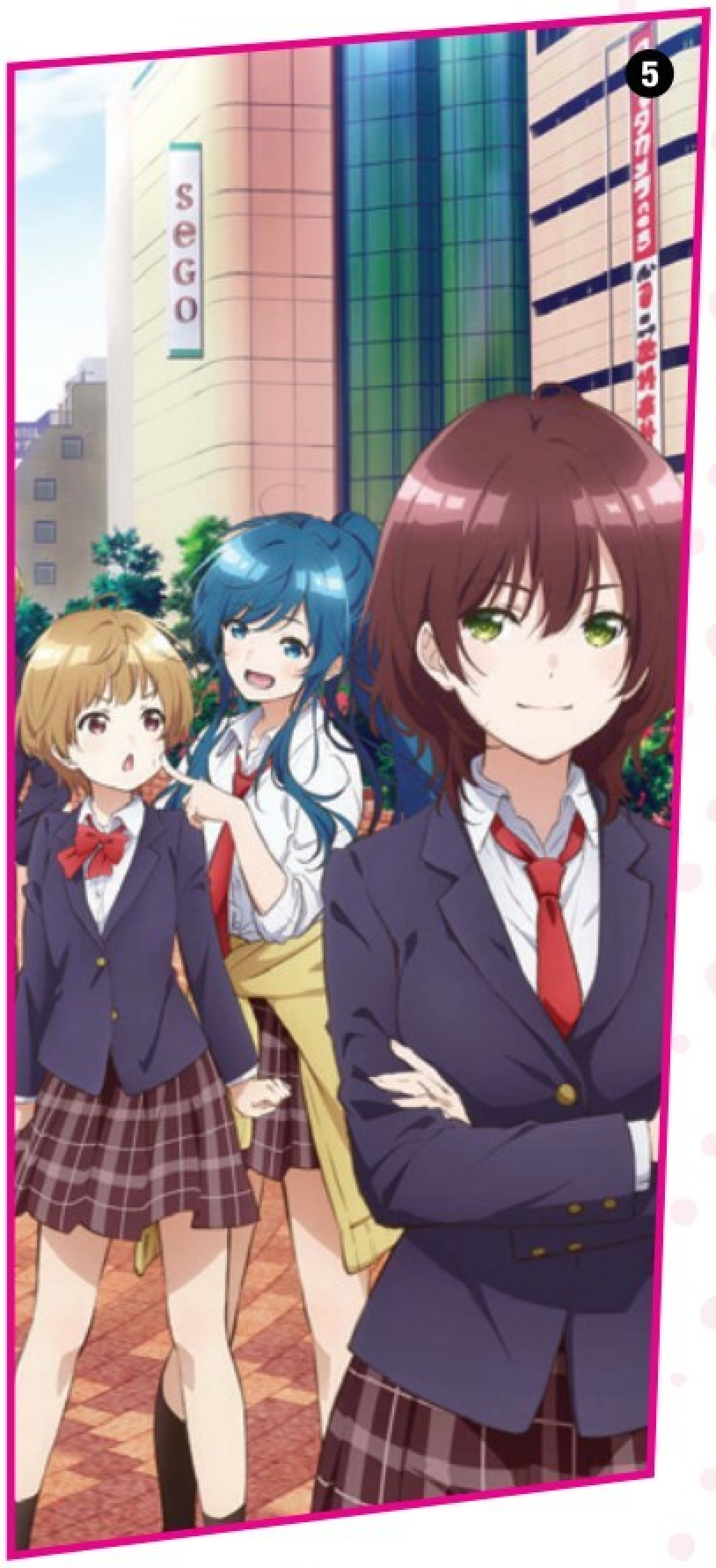
The billion-dollar Japanese animation industry continues to increase its popularity globally, thanks to more streaming programs supporting it. Outside of niche streaming services like Crunchyroll and Funimation, which have a sole focus on distributing anime, big-name companies like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon have also brought more Japanese animated shows to their respective platforms. We now have more options than ever to choose from, which is a good thing, because a wide variety of genres and themed shows have cropped up over the years. And to the delight of gamers, a lot of them involve video games in some way.

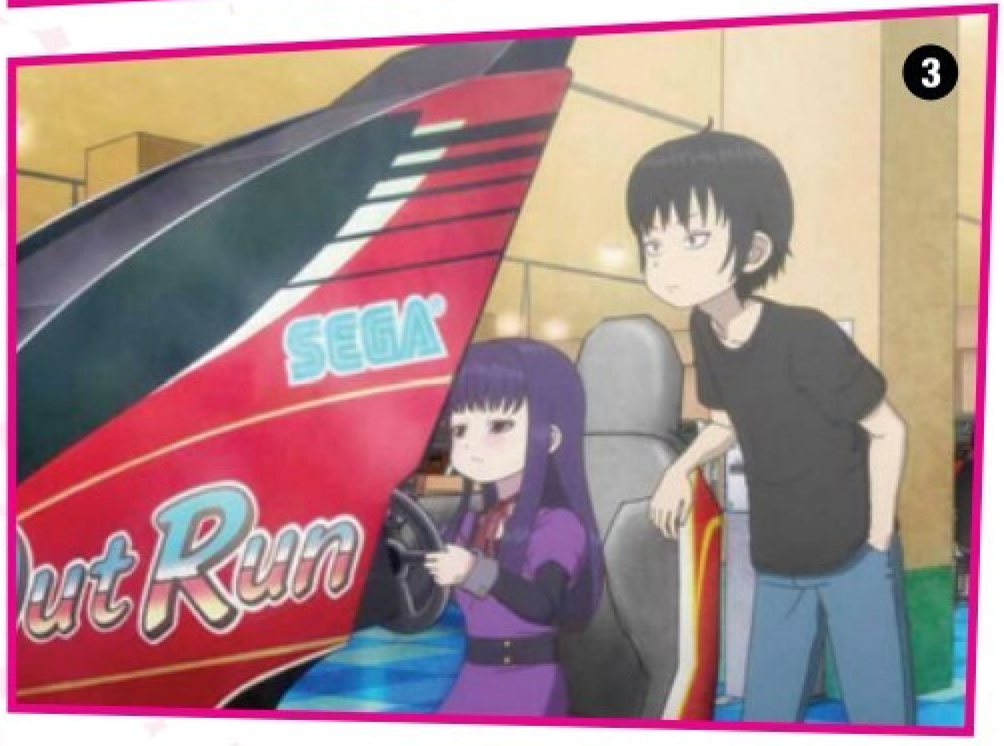
There's no denying the crossover between anime and video game fans. After all, many video games are influenced by anime, having similar plotlines, complete with flashy action sequences and thrilling heroics. We picked some anime that involve video games in creative ways, from going inside the trials and tribulations of a development studio to being transported into an MMORPG and living a different life. Here are our recommendations if you're looking for the perfect combination of your favorite hobby and the anime asthetic.

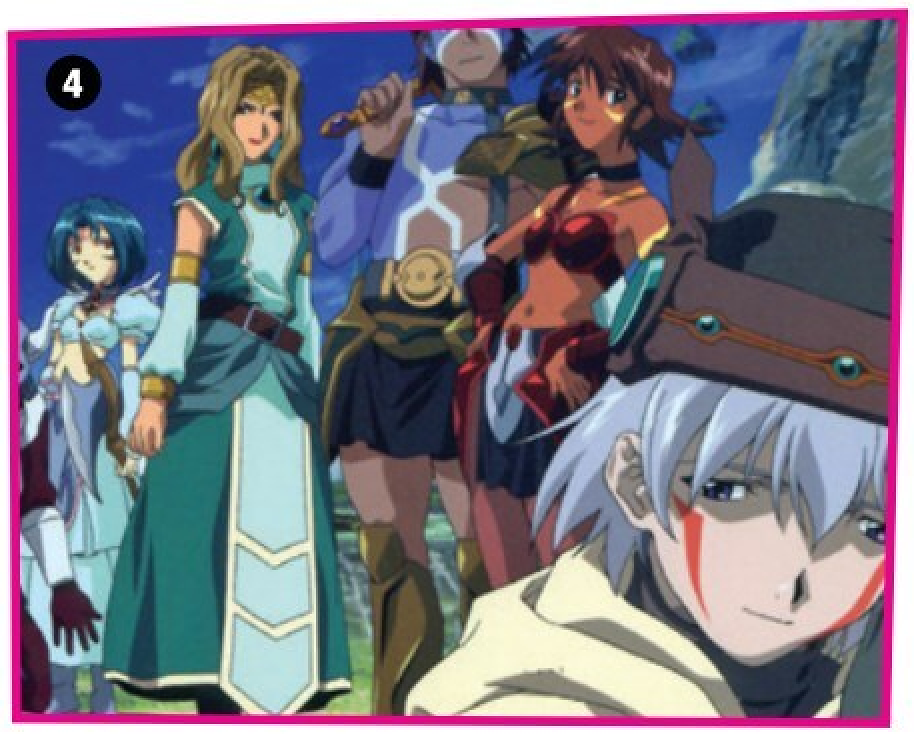
by Kimberley Wallace











①

New Game!

Rating: TV-14

Most anime reference video games or show characters enjoying the hobby, but *New Game!* takes you into the world of game development, demonstrating the blood, sweat, and tears that go into the process. The narrative centers on the ambitious and bright-eyed Aoba, who starts her first day as a character designer for an all-female studio called Eagle Jump. Watching the team build a camaraderie as they work to make a sequel to their popular game is endearing, but there's also something very charming about watching Aoba learn from her superiors and realize that it takes time to master any craft. Equal parts lighthearted and heart-warming, *New Game!* shows how the littlest details can transform games into something special.

②

Gamers!

Rating: TV-14

The name (complete with exclamation point) says it all, putting the focus rightfully where it belongs. *Gamers!* is all about being a gamer and the bonds we build with others through our virtual pastime. The story focuses on a small group of students who are members of a game club at school. Expect trips to the arcade, video game shops, and seeing characters faceoff against each other in real games like fighter Persona 4 Arena Ultimax. Oh, and don't forget some complicated feelings in the love department. Every good anime needs that type of drama on the side.

③

Hi-Score Girl

Rating: TV-14

An adorable anime that pays homage to the classic '90s games many played at arcades, like Street Fighter II and Virtua Cop, *Hi-Score Girl* is the ultimate showcase of the competitive spirit and rivalries formed over getting our initials on the top-score display. Obsessed with games and bored with academia, Haruo meets his gaming match in Akira, the rich girl from his school. The two couldn't be more different, but they both approach games in interesting ways with unique strategies to surpass the competition. *Hi-School Girl* touches on our gaming pride and accepting the success of others, while also captivating with the burgeoning bond between Haruo and Akira, who may just be exactly what each other needs as they face their own hardships.

④

.hack//Sign

Rating: TV-14

What if you entered a video game world but couldn't log out? *.hack//Sign* is one of the more classic picks on this list, but an essential addition as it set a high bar for anime, especially with how it portrays our relationship with video games in surprising and thoughtful ways. When main character Tsukasa logs into MMORPG The World, he wakes up in a dungeon with short-term memory loss and soon realizes he is unable to exit the game. The suspense coupled with the lure of unraveling the mysteries behind the MMORPG and Tsukasa's real-world identity keeps you watching, but the larger topics of anxiety, escapism, and acceptance provide substance and meaning. Mostly, *.hack//Sign* just nails how people often assume certain roles in a virtual world to compensate for something missing in their real life.

⑤

Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki

Rating: TV-14

As one of the newer anime on this list, *Bottom-Tier Character* follows Tomozaki, who ranks as the top in the world at a Smash Bros. clone called Attack Families, but struggles at playing the game of "life." When he meets another high-ranking player, who just so happens to be a popular girl from his school, she decides to help level up his IRL abilities, so he can see how human interaction can be just as rewarding and fun as mastering video games. Seeing daily life presented as an RPG with stats to acquire and improve will bring a smile, as will Tomozaki's unbridled passion for his favorite game and what it takes to excel at it.

6

Sword Art Online

Rating: TV-14

In many ways, *.hack* opened the door for *Sword Art Online*, which modernizes the concept by having the characters visit virtual reality MMORPG worlds. *SAO* starts with Kirito logging into the first release of Sword Art Online with 10,000 other players using a VR device known as the NerveGear, which stimulates the brain directly. Not all is as it seems, as players soon discover that they cannot log out – and that if they fall in the game, they die in real life. Main character Kirito grinds through the 100-level Aincrad dungeon alongside his progression raid guild and love interest Asuna, to try and escape the game. *SAO* also features multiple spinoffs, with a fantasy VRMMO called Alfheim Online, a shooter called Gun Gale Online, and the newest spinoff, Alicization, which tackles some all-new topics, like raising interesting questions about artificial intelligence.

7

Accel World

Rating: TV-14

Accel World comes from the mind of *Sword Art Online*'s creator, Reki Kawahara, and also taps into futuristic concepts about technology. Protagonist Haru isn't the most popular guy to walk his high school; overweight and bullied, he spends his time playing virtual squash alone on his school's local network cyberspace. His life changes when his gaming skills catch the eye of the popular student council vice president, who introduces him to a secret program that allows its players to accelerate their cognition process to the point where time stops. Entitled Brain Burst, the ARMMO fighting game requires people to duel to obtain Burst Points, which can then be used for acceleration abilities in the real world. Watching Haru work toward the highest score in hopes of meeting the game's creator for answers is a thrill, and the epic duels, which pull out all the stops in the flashy moves department, don't disappoint.

8

Wotakoi: Love Is Hard For Otaku

Rating: TV-NR

Narumi and Hirotaka are all about keeping up appearances; Narumi works in a nice office, while Hirotaka is the epitome of a company man. However, when they're both out of work, you can find Narumi obsessing over the latest yaoi manga, and Hirotaka glued to his latest video game adventure. Former middle school classmates, the two reconnect and confide in each other over how hard it is to find love because people tend to look down on their passions. The anime explores the ups and downs as the pair try to keep up their facades and also search for love - being each other's shoulder to cry on for moral support - because, as the title says, love is hard for otaku.

9

And You Thought There Is Never A Girl Online?

Rating: TV-MA

Hideki Nishimura gets more than he bargained for when he finally meets his MMORPG guild in real life and discovers they're all girl gamers from his high school. The group quickly forms a school club as a way to play the game together, but Hideki realizes he has his hands full with Ako, who has taken a special interest in him and struggles to separate the game from their relationship in real life. Full of humorous moments and relatable gaming mishaps, *And You Thought There Is Never A Girl Online?* captures what makes us enjoy playing games with others, while also showing how easy it is to get caught up in the fantasy to avoid facing our own hardships and feelings in life.

10

The World God Only Knows

Rating: TV-NR

Keima Katsuragi is a master at dating sims, wooing every 2D girl that comes his way. His reputation and skill precede him, so when he gets an email offering him a contract to "conquer" girls, he thinks of it as just another game challenge. Unfortunately for him, he's just made a deal with a demon from Hell and now must honor his side of the agreement by helping her capture runaway spirits. The only way to draw these spirits out of the girls' hearts they hide in? By making them fall in love. Now, Keima must get to know girls and why they are the way they are without being behind a video game screen. After all, it's the only way to make these demons leave their side. As a bonus, the real humor comes from Keima's interactions with his clumsy demon sidekick; never has a pair been more mismatched to combat the heart.

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CELEBRATING GREAT ANIME GAMES

Looking to enter your favorite anime? Check out these recommendations

Licensed video games are hit and miss and have had to prove themselves as being able to compete in a market chock-full of fascinating concepts and dynamic gameplay. However, developers continue to get better at capitalizing on anime's strengths and presenting the subject matter in interesting ways. From visual novels to fighting games, there's no shortage of options available for you to experience your fandom in video games. Stepping into the shoes of your favorite character or playing in a similar competition as they do is a treat, as it almost feels like you're becoming a part of your favorite anime.

As more people become anime fans, it is hard to know which video game adaptations are worth your time. Enter the Game Informer staff. We made a list of 10 anime games you should consider taking for a spin. When making these decisions, we looked toward newer releases, but that didn't stop us from picking a game if we felt it was worthy and easily available. In the end, we strove for good games from a wide variety of anime. Because while watching is one thing, playing a game devoted to an anime is another.

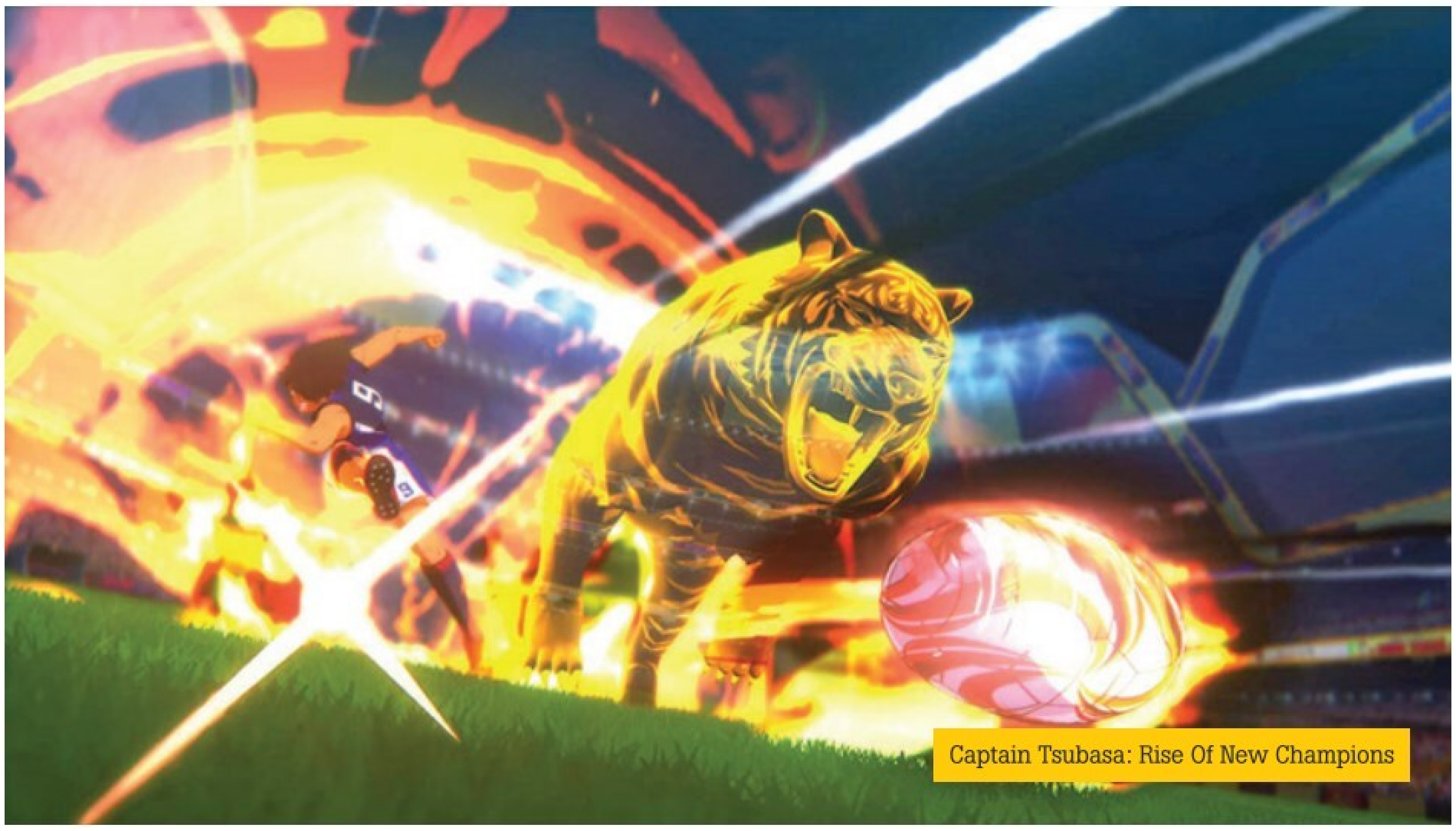
by Kimberley Wallace

Dragon Ball FighterZ

PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Dragon Ball FighterZ made a name for itself on the fighting game scene, but it also welcomed all challengers. Players of all skill levels were able to get in on the Dragon Ball power fantasy of distributing over-the-top moves as popular characters like Goku, Frieza, and Vegeta. Every move you make takes on a whole new – and bigger – meaning when you're talking about Dragon Ball, making for satisfying punch combos, kicks that send baddies flying at top speed, and deadly super moves so powerful that the game cuts to space so you can fully appreciate the planet-shattering explosions. Standard combos, dashes, and double jumps are easy to execute, and you have several ways to counter spammers who rely on similar tactics and moves, with advanced combos and strategies available to those wanting to take their skills further. A meaty, lighthearted story mode also gives fans something to look forward to, with antagonist Android 21 building up power. However, the dialogue is at its best when it's

Dragon Ball FighterZ


Captain Tsubasa: Rise Of New Champions

poking fun at the lore, and hilarious character interactions occur as a result. Either way, the game offers a ton of content, while also being a great fighting game in its own right.

Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 4 – Road To Boruto

PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Look, there's been a lot of Naruto games over the years, but the Ultimate Ninja Storm series has remained a reliable choice for a fun time. The way to play this seventh and final installment is with the version that includes the Road to Boruto expansion, which adds characters from the 2015 Boruto movie, including adult versions of the younger fighters. In Ultimate Ninja Storm 4, players battle in 3D arenas, and have the ability to swap between three fighters (think Marvel vs. Capcom). The entry boasts 106 fighters from the Naruto universe, and even brought back wall-running, which hasn't been around since the original game. While the fighting remains simple, new mechanics, like the ability to break weapons and inflict elemental damage for cool effects (fire burns clothes!), keeps battles interesting. The story focuses on the Fourth Shinobi World War and lets you see the events from different characters' perspectives, while the Boruto expansion picks up 15 years after. Great visuals, interesting story twists, and intense boss fights make it worth your time, especially if you've been in the Naruto game for the long haul.

Captain Tsubasa: Rise Of New Champions

PS4, Switch, PC

There's a chance you haven't heard of the storied *Captain Tsubasa* anime, but even so, if you like soccer, Captain Tsubasa is worth a look – and even more so for fans, due to all the great callbacks to the anime. Captain Tsubasa is a fast-paced, arcade-style soccer game, with over-the-top shots and in-your-face blocks, all in fully animated glory. The story mode has two different routes: one lets you control Tsubasa and make a name for yourself competing in middle school tournaments, which mostly follows the anime. The other version lets you create your own avatar and go up against other star middle schoolers as part of Team Japan. Another cool feature is the ability to create your own characters, picking their skills and abilities, to build your dream team to use offline and online. It's not FIFA, but a more bombastic style of soccer, and the visuals are gorgeous to boot, even if the online features aren't always the most technically sound.

Yu-Gi-Oh! Legacy Of The Duelist: Link Evolution

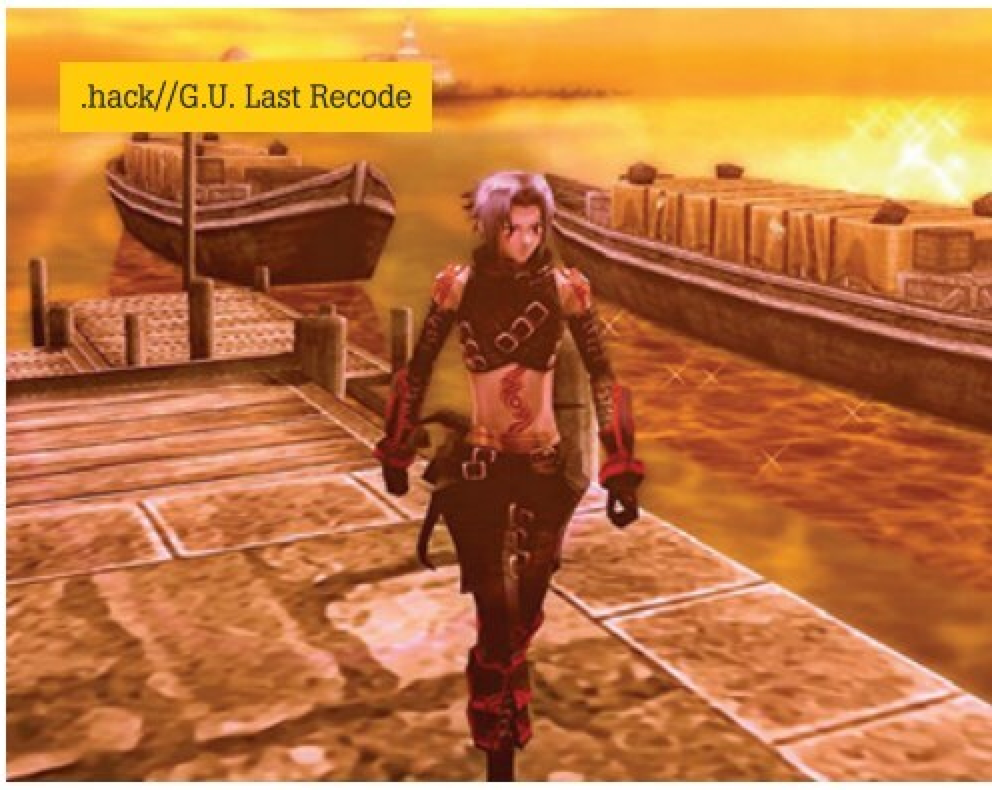
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

It's time to D-d-d-d-duel! 2019's Yu-Gi-Oh! Legacy of the Duelist: Link Evolution is the most recent digital release of Konami's popular trading card game. Featuring over 10,000 cards from the history of Yu-Gi-Oh!, Link Evolution features the New Master Rules, introduced by VRAINS. Fans will recognize characters from most of the anime series, spanning the original, GX, 5D's, ZEXAL, ARC-V, and VRAINS. Unfortunately, no content from Sevens, the newest series from 2020, is planned. Gameplay should come naturally to veterans, though there's a good tutorial for learning if you've never played Yu-Gi-Oh before. Even if you don't know what the Millennium Puzzle is and you've never played card games on motorcycles, this is a good entry point.

.hack//G.U. Last Recode

PS4, PC

What if I told you that instead of playing an MMORPG, you should, instead, enter a simulated one? Trust me, it's worth it for the places .hack//G.U. goes. The Last Recode collection contains the .hack//G.U. trilogy that originally hit PS2, but with graphical enhancements, a brand-new chapter, and several quality-of-life improvements. These games were great back when they were released, as Haseo's hunt for the infamous Tri-Edge has plenty of twists and turns to keep you invested, and the various characters he meets along the way, like buddies Gaspard and Silabus, mean there's never a dull moment. The action combat of busting up baddies with fierce combos while searching dungeons for rare items never gets old and piecing together what's really going on is a big part of the fun. Each game volume builds off the previous, making you feel the power of Haseo's new abilities as he grows from the grind. Oh, and the boss battles don't disappoint, because you never know if you're dealing with friend or foe.


.hack//G.U. Last Recode

ANIME GAMES ON THE HORIZON

It's time to mark your calendar! While a lot of what's on the horizon is still under wraps, there are a few games on the release schedule worth keeping on your radar, especially if you're an anime fan. Don't let these pass you by.

Scarlet Nexus

PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC

Launching on June 25, Bandai Namco is going all-out with its new futuristic action/RPG. Created by some of the minds behind Tales of Vesperia, the team embraced the opportunity to do something more sci-fi and didn't hold back, creating a bizarre world where brain-eating mutants are falling from the sky and elite psionics must protect Japan with their over-the-top powers. Bandai Namco sees potential in the idea – so much so that an anime is hitting next year to supplement it.

Dragon Quest The Adventure Of Dai: A Hero's Bond

iOS/Android

Set to release sometime in 2021, this mobile team RPG complements the recent The Adventure of Dai anime that's based off the hit manga series. In it, you engage in three-lane battles, and can play co-op online with up to three players. Two different story modes are available, one that follows the original storyline where you complete quests to add familiar characters to your team, while the other is an all-new story written under the supervision of Riku Sanjo who was the mastermind behind The Adventure of Dai manga. Pre-registration is currently open.

Neo: The World Ends With You

PS4, Switch, PC

If you've watched the recent The World Ends With You anime, this game is the sequel to that storyline and what we experienced in the original game. Hitting on July 27 for PS4 and Switch and later this summer for PC, Neo follows a new protagonist named Rindo, who gets caught up in the infamous "Reaper's Game," and you can expect some cameos from past characters as new revelations come to light about this deadly competition and what it means for our new characters and old favorites. For more details, check out our preview on pg. 64.

Digimon Survive

PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Still targeting a 2021 release, Digimon Survive has had a few delays. Nonetheless, we're still interested in seeing how a survival/strategy Digimon game fares. Digimon Survive involves a lot of player choice, which influences the story and the Digimon digivolution process. The gameplay is split between searching the island, befriending characters, and battle segments. Between the choices and dividing your time appropriately, it sounds like a fun twist on the already engaging Digimon formula.

Pokémon Legends: Arceus

Switch

We're finally getting an open-world Pokémon game. The only downside? We just have to wait until early 2022 to experience it. Set in the Sinnoh region from Gen 4, the game takes place long before the events of Diamond and Pearl. As an action/RPG, Arceus is also changing things up a bit for the series, but Game Freak said it's still honoring the classic gameplay that came before it. Since this game is set in the past (you're creating Sinnoh's first Pokédex, after all), expect wood Poké Balls, with steam puffing out when a Pokémon gets caught. This is before the times of Pokémon trainers and tournaments, which seems like a fun and new way to experience the world.

Demon Slayer: The Video Game

PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC

CyberConnect2, which is no stranger to games in the anime space and most recently worked on Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot, is at the helm of a new Demon Slayer game hitting Japan some time this year. Right now, a Western release hasn't been announced, but with the show's success, we'd bet on it eventually coming our way. Based on footage, the game closely follows the Naruto Ultimate Ninja Storm formula, where you choose a character and select an arena to fight in. You can expect flashy combos, swift evasive maneuvers, and of course, stunning finishers with cinematics to match.

One Piece Pirate Warriors 4

PS4, Xbox One, Switch

We couldn't make this list without having a musou game, and Omega Force, master of the genre, has once again used its prowess to great effect. One Piece Pirate Warriors 4 takes the hack-and-slash Dynasty Warriors formula and melds it with One Piece's adenturing spirit. Team up with Luffy and the Straw Hats as you search various islands to find the "one piece" – the treasure of their dreams. But beware, as you fight hordes of enemies, buildings will come crashing down and attacks throw up smoke and dust for extra obstacles. Omega Force's attention to detail and care comes through, especially in each character's distinct fighting style. On top of that, you also get to relive your favorite *One Piece* moments, playing as iconic adventurers and visiting famous areas from the anime. However, the game also has some surprises, with its own original story that takes the unfinished Wano arc in new and interesting directions. It's a good musou game and a good One Piece game. What more could you want?

Digimon Story Cyber Sleuth: Complete Edition

Switch, PC

The Cyber Sleuth series was a reimagining of the RPG formula for the Digimon franchise, and it turned into a fine and entertaining effort. The problem? It fell under the radar, but not enough to stop Bandai Namco from creating a sequel. Now you can own the complete edition, which

Digimon Story Cyber Sleuth: Complete Edition contains both games that added some much-needed gusto into the franchise. Not surprising from the title, in these games you're going into cyberspace as a hacker to solve mysteries, and most importantly, collect the hundreds of Digimon available to raise and bring into battle. The classic turn-based battle system is still a delight, especially as you exploit enemy weaknesses with your Digimon's elemental strengths. Evolving Digimon for new powers and designs is still the highlight, but Cyber Sleuth also leans into its Tokyo backdrop, smartly blurring the line between the digital and real world. Basically, you get two solid RPGs in one package and tons of cool and adorable Digimon to raise to new heights.

Fist Of The North Star: Lost Paradise

Steins;Gate Elite

PS4, Switch, PC

This is an updated version of the Steins;Gate game that launched back in 2009 and quickly made a name for itself. The difference with Elite? It is fully animated, weaving in actual footage from the 2011 anime alongside new animation for story elements that are unique to the game. The experience mostly functions as a visual novel, but the narrative branches depending on your choices, which also results in different endings. While the overall story of Steins;Gate isn't a secret at this point, you want to go in knowing as little as possible. I'll say this much: It's a science-fiction story about time travel, international conspiracies, and multiple timelines. Come for the discussion about physics and its different theories but stay to see the intense plot go to a very satisfying place. This is hands-down the best way to experience one of the best visual novels around.

Fist Of The North Star: Lost Paradise

PS4

Sega's Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio is well known for its Yakuza series, but the team took a quick divergence to release Fist of the North Star: Lost Paradise in 2018. Protagonist Kenshiro spends his time exploring the wasteland that Earth has become while fighting a plethora of foes and making them die in the most gruesome ways possible thanks to his fighting style of Hokuto Shinken. While in this post-apocalyptic world, Kenshiro has plenty of normal activities to keep him busy – like baseball, bartending, or taking a page from his Yakuza cohort Kazuma Kiryu, playing retro games like Out Run. While Lost Paradise isn't the epitome of gaming greatness, it's a very competent action-adventure with top-notch animation and action.

Fairy Tail

PS4, Switch, PC

If you've ever wanted to journey to the Kingdom of Fiore and join a mage guild with Dragon Slayer Natsu and company, you're in luck. Koei Tecmo and Gust's Fairy Tail RPG covers several arcs from the anime, and begins with their adventure to rebuild their guild to its former glory. The best part? This ties right into the gameplay. You accept missions and requests, slowly raising your guild's renown via a lettered ranking system. As you earn money from missions, you use it to upgrade your guild's exterior, such as adding a magic shop or a better quest board. You also build bonds with the various characters that join your side, like Wendy and Gray, which strengthens your teamwork on the battlefield. The turn-based battles have a focus on managing your MP wisely alongside chaining attacks and performing combination specials. The whole adventure is wrapped up in an engaging loop that keeps you doing one more mission or working toward that next upgrade. Plus, there's always Happy to make you smile. ◆

Fairy Tail

ON SECOND

by Ben Reeves

THOUGHT...

Double Fine revives its beloved platformer with Psychonauts 2

Razputin "Raz" Aquato was once just your average, ordinary kid with psychic powers. Now he is on a globetrotting quest as a member of one of the planet's most powerful anti-terrorist organizations: the Psychonauts. It all began when Raz ran away from the circus to join Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp and discovered an unhinged plot to harvest children's brains to power a battalion of psychic death tanks. Raz naturally foiled that plan and saved the day, but his adventure ended on a cliffhanger when the young psychic powerhouse learned that the head of the Psychonauts had been kidnapped. Without a second to spare, Raz flew off with a handful of other powerful psychic agents to perform a daring rescue.

» *Platform*
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Mac

» *Style*
1- Player Platforming

» *Publisher*
Xbox Game Studios

» *Developer*
Double Fine

» *Release*
2021

That was 16 years ago.

Double Fine released the original Psychonauts in 2005, introducing us to Raz's wacky world through a series of fun platforming challenges. Psychonauts enchanted fans with its absurd humor and reality-warping antics, but it also left many eager for revelations that have been a long time coming.

Later this year, fans can finally return to this mind-bending world for another adventure full of child-like whimsy, refined platforming, and a host of new perspective-warping mindscapes. Unfortunately, Raz is about to discover that the Psychonauts aren't what they once were. If this precocious child has any hope of restoring the beloved organization to its former glory, he must hunt down a spy and reckon with his family's ancient curse … oh, and he might just save the world again while he's at it.

Hollis

HITTING THE MOTHERLOBE

Fans may have been waiting a long time to continue Raz's journey, but within the Psychonauts' fiction, only a handful of days have passed since Raz left summer camp. The 2017 PlayStation VR game Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin centered on Raz's mission to rescue the head of the Psychonauts, Truman Zanotto, from a secret undersea lab, but that title only covered the events of a single day. Psychonauts 2 picks up the story the very next morning as Raz arrives at the Psychonauts' headquarters, The Motherlobe, for a debrief.

"You ride back to base, and you realize that Doctor Loboto, amateur dentist and hobbyist brain surgeon [and one of the antagonists from the original Psychonauts], probably couldn't have hatched his scheme by himself," says Double Fine studio head Tim Schafer. "He's got a helper inside the Psychonauts, a mole inside the Psychonauts, and that's where the plot of this game starts. Who is the mole? How are we going to find the mole?"

The Motherlobe is the nerve center for the Psychonauts. Dozens of professional-looking businesspeople mill about the lobby while a few psychics dash off to the Think Tank – a building wing that contains several Psychonaut offices. One agent meditates in a corner while others grab a bite in the official commissary, cleverly titled the Noodle Bowl. Meanwhile, Raz looks over a giant wall sculpture depicting important Psychonauts from yesteryear. The Motherlobe serves as the game's hub. Raz will regularly return to this sprawling complex between missions, allowing him to hunt for hidden collectibles and purchase consumables, such as health pickups, from the Psychonauts' shop.

"It was really important for us to feel like the world of the Psychonauts opened up to Raz," says art director Lisette Titre-Montgommery. "We wanted to make it feel like a really open, explorative space rather than a narrow, dungeon corridor … You see that the Psychonauts spent all their money on the headquarters, but they couldn't take care of the grounds, so you see unfinished areas and scaffolding up in parts. We used those deconstructed elements to help build pathing into

The Lady Luctopus Casino is a hotspot for anyone looking to gamble their life savings away

areas so you're jumping on scaffolding and there's rebar sticking out that you can swing off."

After the events of the first Psychonauts and Rhombus of Ruin, Raz feels like he's proven himself, and he's eager to hunt down the Psychonauts' mole. Unfortunately, a few important Psychonauts don't recognize Raz's full capability. Hollis Forsythe, the second-in-command of the Psychonauts, is uncomfortable with letting Raz immediately jump into dangerous Psychonauts missions, and relegates him to the intern program. Raz has gone from saving the world to being on the lowest rung of the organization. Most of the other interns are all too eager to pick on the new kid to make matters worse.

"Hollis Forsythe has been running the Psychonauts since Truman Zanotto got kidnapped," Schafer says. "She's dealing with the financial problems they have. They're less funded since they brought about world psychic peace, so people don't think they need the Psychonauts anymore. She's trying to hold it all together and deal with the fact that there's this counterspy in the organization, so she's very worried about the safety of the kids."

As luck would have it, Raz will soon learn a new skill that could help him reverse his fortunes and prove himself to Hollis and the rest of his fellow interns – as long as he doesn't accidentally dismantle the Psychonauts in the process.

THE AQUATO FAMILY HISTORY

Raz is just a 10-year-old kid, but he grew up in the circus, so he has many acrobatic skills that allow him to accomplish things other kids his age cannot. Raz has always been good at tumbling, walking on tight ropes, and swinging on the trapeze, and his psychic powers amplify his raw talent. Sadly, Raz felt like he needed to keep his psychic powers a secret from his parents.

"His family's always been very anti-psychic, or as the circus folk describe it, they're very anti-fortune-teller; there are acrobats and there are fortune tellers on the different sides of the circus, and they don't trust each other," says Double Fine studio head Tim Schafer. "So Raz always knew that he had to hide the fact that he was psychic."

At the end of the first game, players discovered that Raz's father is actually slightly psychic, and that fortune-teller blood runs in the Aquato family. Additionally, his ancestors were cursed so that every family member would one day die in water. Schafer says that this family history will play a significant role in Psychonauts 2.

"Raz is so scared of water that it manifests in the form of a giant claw, and whenever he gets close to water, this creepy hand comes out and tries to grab him and pull him under," Schafer says. "Fighting that curse was going to be a boss fight in the first game. There was going to be a point where you had to cross some water, but you couldn't. We drew this water curse, this big water monster, but that was cut from the first game. Dealing with that story point was something that I've always wanted to do. Now, we're doing it."

SHOULD YOU PLAY RHOMBUS OF RUIN?

In 2017, Double Fine released Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin for PlayStation VR. The game was later ported to PC, but it can still only be experienced in VR, so should you make an effort to play this small project before jumping into Psychonauts 2?

Devoted fans might want to do a quick playthrough of Rhombus of Ruin since it details Raz's mission to rescue the head of the Psychonauts, Truman Zanotto, which won't be covered in the sequel. Psychonauts 2, in turn, picks up directly after Rhombus of Ruin, showing Raz return to Psychonauts headquarters with Zanotto.

"I always meant for Psychonauts 2 to be set at the end of that journey when Raz comes to Psychonauts headquarters," says Double Fine studio head Tim Schafer. "It was all gonna be about being at the headquarters of the Psychonauts, but I felt like we were skipping over this exciting rescue mission, so we did that small game, just that one-level game in VR."

Rhombus of Ruin is a cute game full of classic Psychonauts wit, and it does a couple of fun things with VR technology, such as letting players experience Raz's powers through his eyes. However, the title doesn't significantly expand on Psychonauts' lore, so you don't need to play the game to understand the narrative in Psychonauts 2.

"We're making a special animated 'Previously On' video, which will tell the whole story of the first game and Rhombus of Ruin, because even for people who played it, that was 10 years ago, or at least 15? A million?" Schafer questions. "It was a long time ago, and so even people who liked the game a lot are going to be like, 'Dr. Lobowho?' This is a helpful reminder, and it's a beautiful piece of animation."

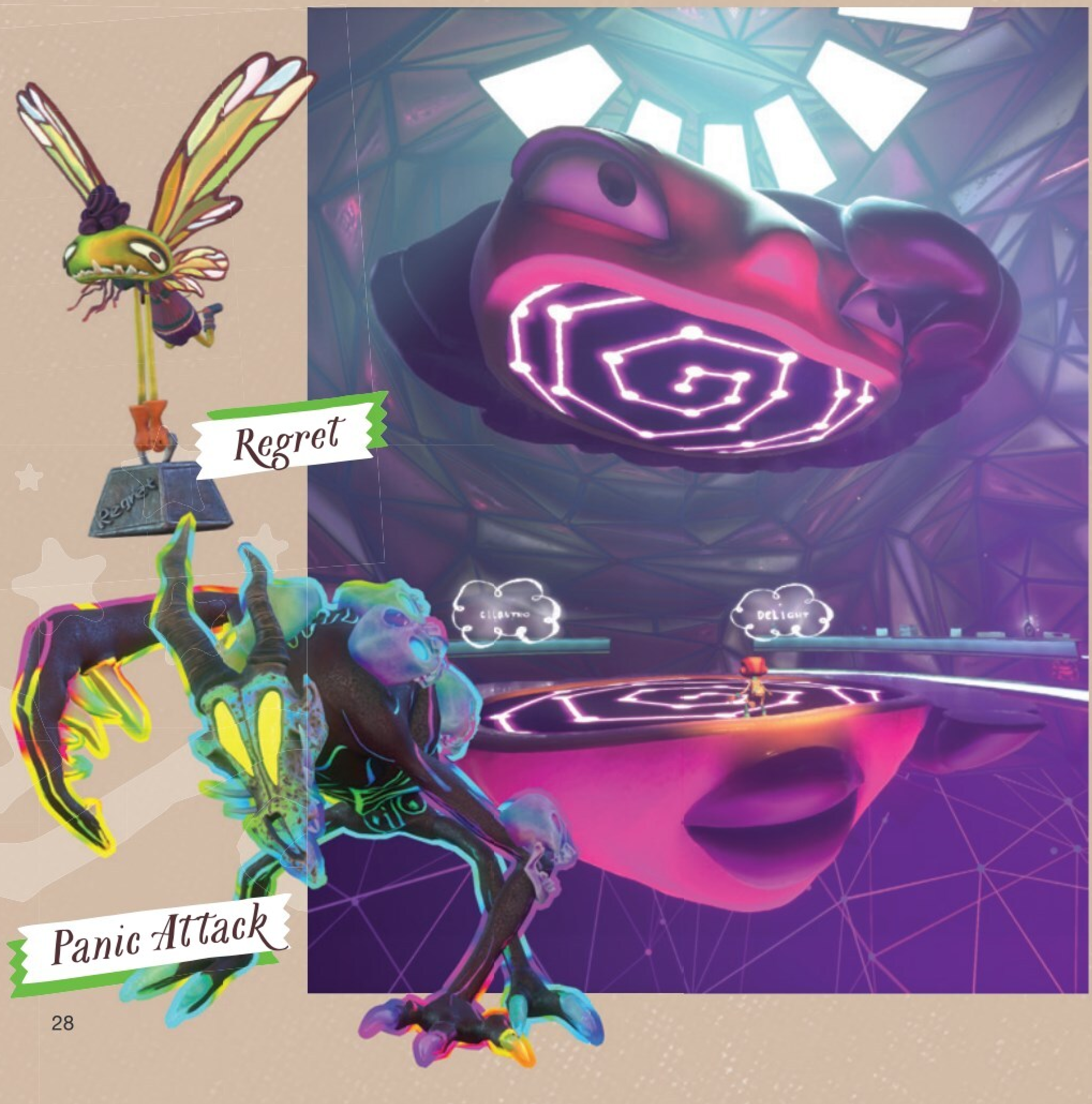
CONNECTING THE DOTS

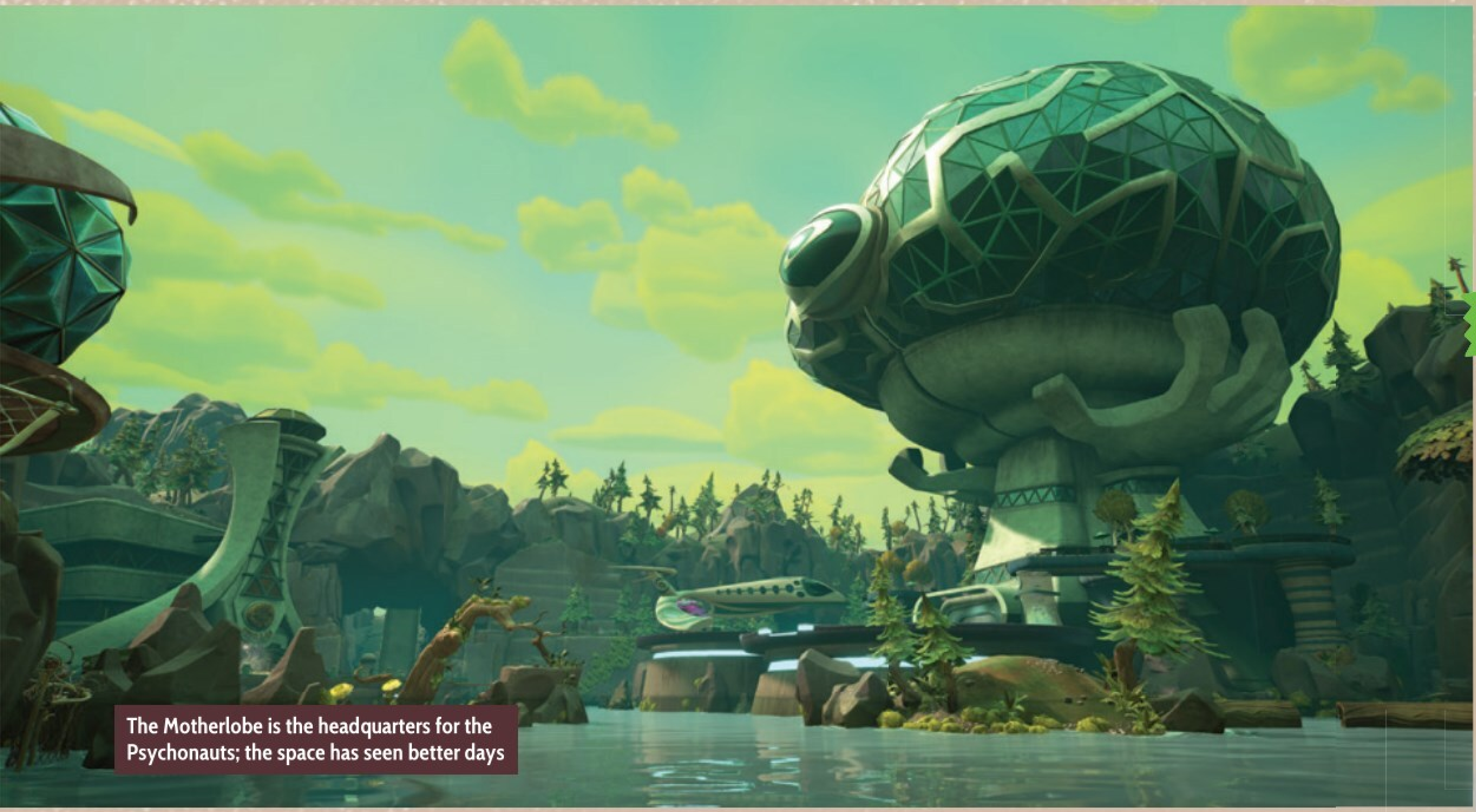
As part of Raz's internship training, Hollis instructs the young cadent in the ways of mental manipulation. This offers the perfect chance for Raz to brush up on his psychic abilities. Throughout the first Psychonauts, Raz learned several powerful mental skills, such as how to lift and throw objects around a room with Telekinesis, set things on fire with Pyrokinesis, and jump higher and glide through the air with Levitation. All of those powers return for the second game, and Raz will have access to them from the get-go. At any time, players can pull up a quick-select menu and assign up to four powers to their controller's shoulder buttons.

Raz will also gain new abilities during this adventure, allowing him to become an even more powerful psychic master. Early on, Hollis teaches Raz an ability called Mental Connection, which enables him to link ideas together in a person's mind. To demonstrate this skill, Hollis invites all the interns into her mind, where she has constructed a virtual classroom for lesson practice.

Inside Hollis' mind, Raz notices a few thought bubbles, which float above the class as if they were clouds. He reaches out to one thought labeled "Delight." Suddenly a beam of Mental Connection energy grabs the thought and pulls Raz up and into the thought bubble. Since Raz is a trained acrobat, many of his mental commands are manifested through physical, often acrobatic maneuvers. In this way, Mental Connection functions like a psychic grappling hook.

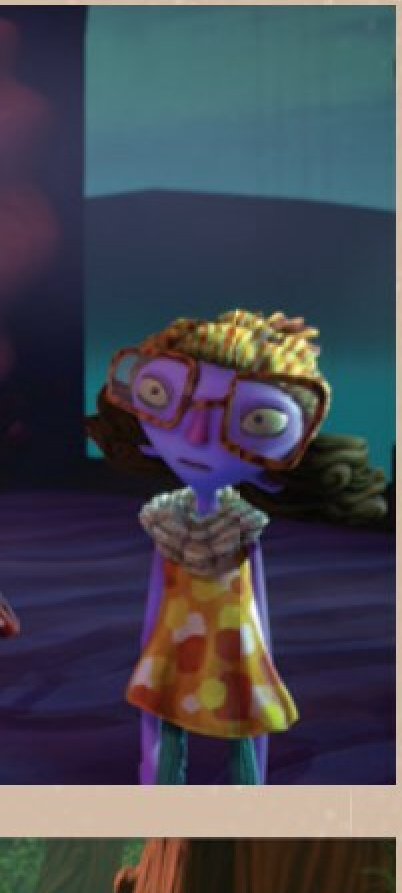
However, the full power of Mental Connection lies in connecting ideas.





The Motherlobe is the headquarters for the Psychonauts; the space has seen better days

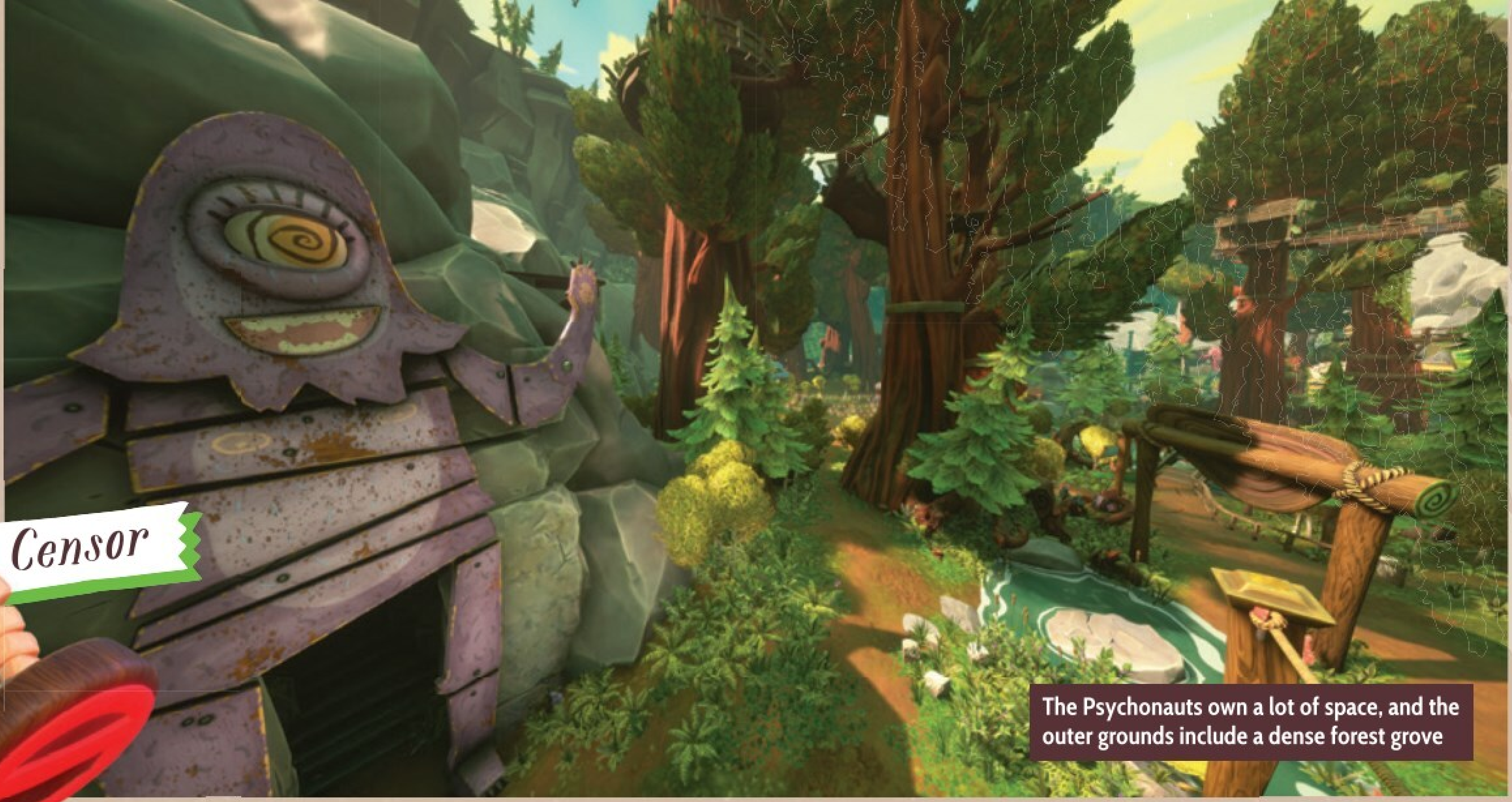
Lizzie
Morris



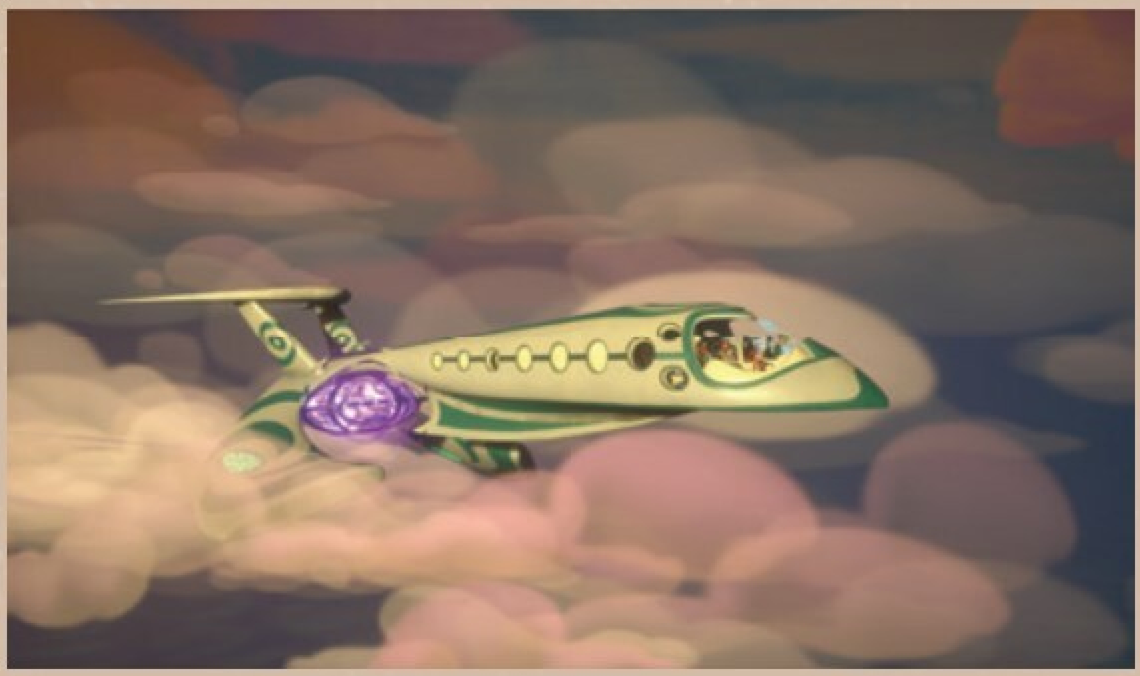
HOW PSYCHONAUTS DEALS WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

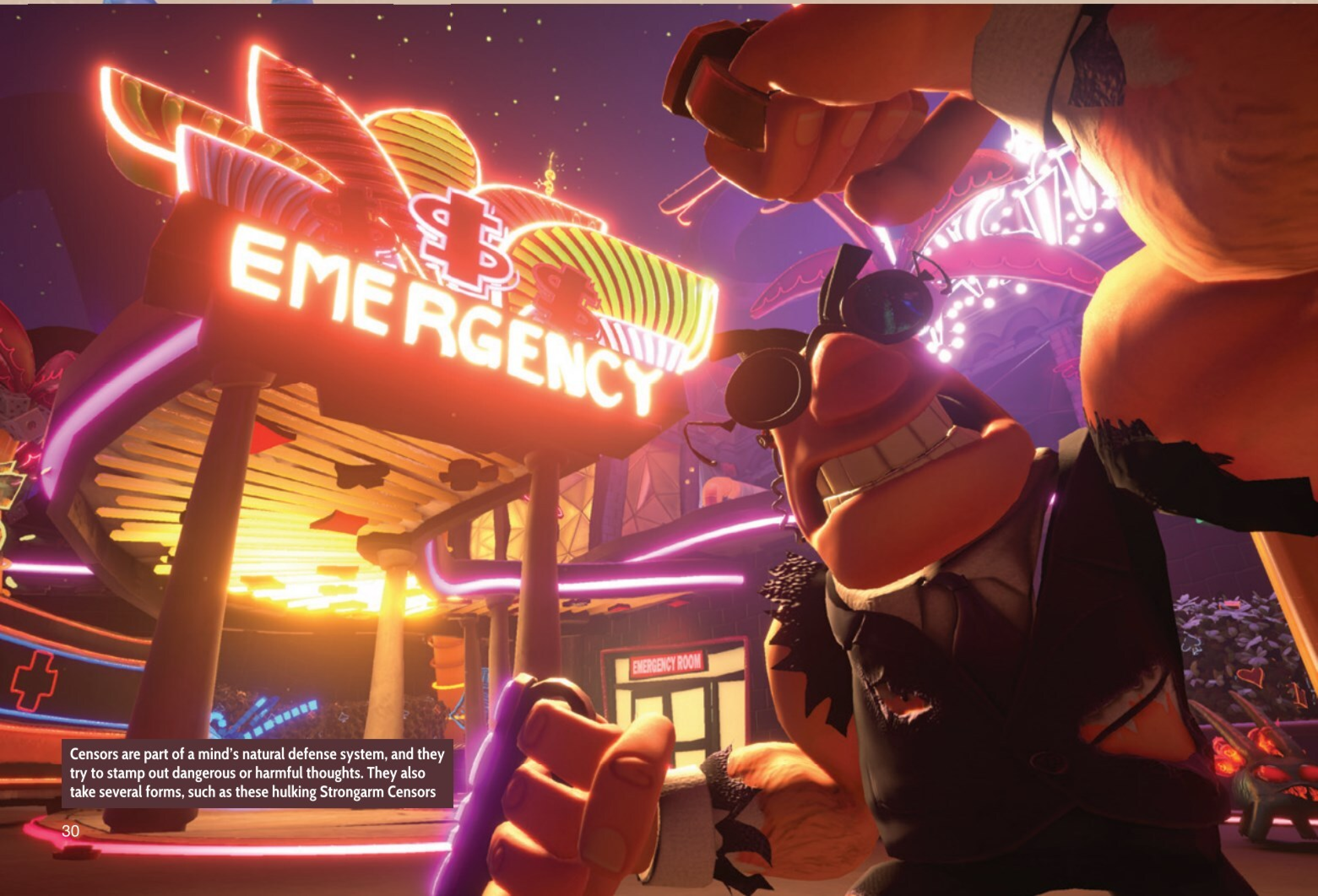
Double Fine was concerned about the artistic representation of mental health themes in Psychonauts 2, so the studio looked for ways to deepen its understanding of real-world mental health issues to ensure it was sensitive to those subjects in the game. As part of this effort, the team reached out to Rafael Boccamazzo, a doctor of clinical psychology and the director at Take This, a mental health nonprofit that works to decrease mental health stigmas in the game industry. Over the years, Take This has received funding from Bethesda, Ubisoft, and Microsoft to continue its work.

"One of the things I was impressed with in talking with the developers was the idea that these mind-altering powers, they're not taken for granted – that people are not entering other's minds with impunity," Boccamazzo says. "The ability to create connections and change thoughts, that's not a low-level power that can be abused easily ... Obviously, this is a fantastical, surreal world where people are jumping through doors into people's minds, so the idea of scientific accuracy, in that case, has to go out the window a bit. But they were really concerned more about sensitivity, and showing these things in a way that was hopeful and helpful. In that respect, I think they did a pretty decent job."

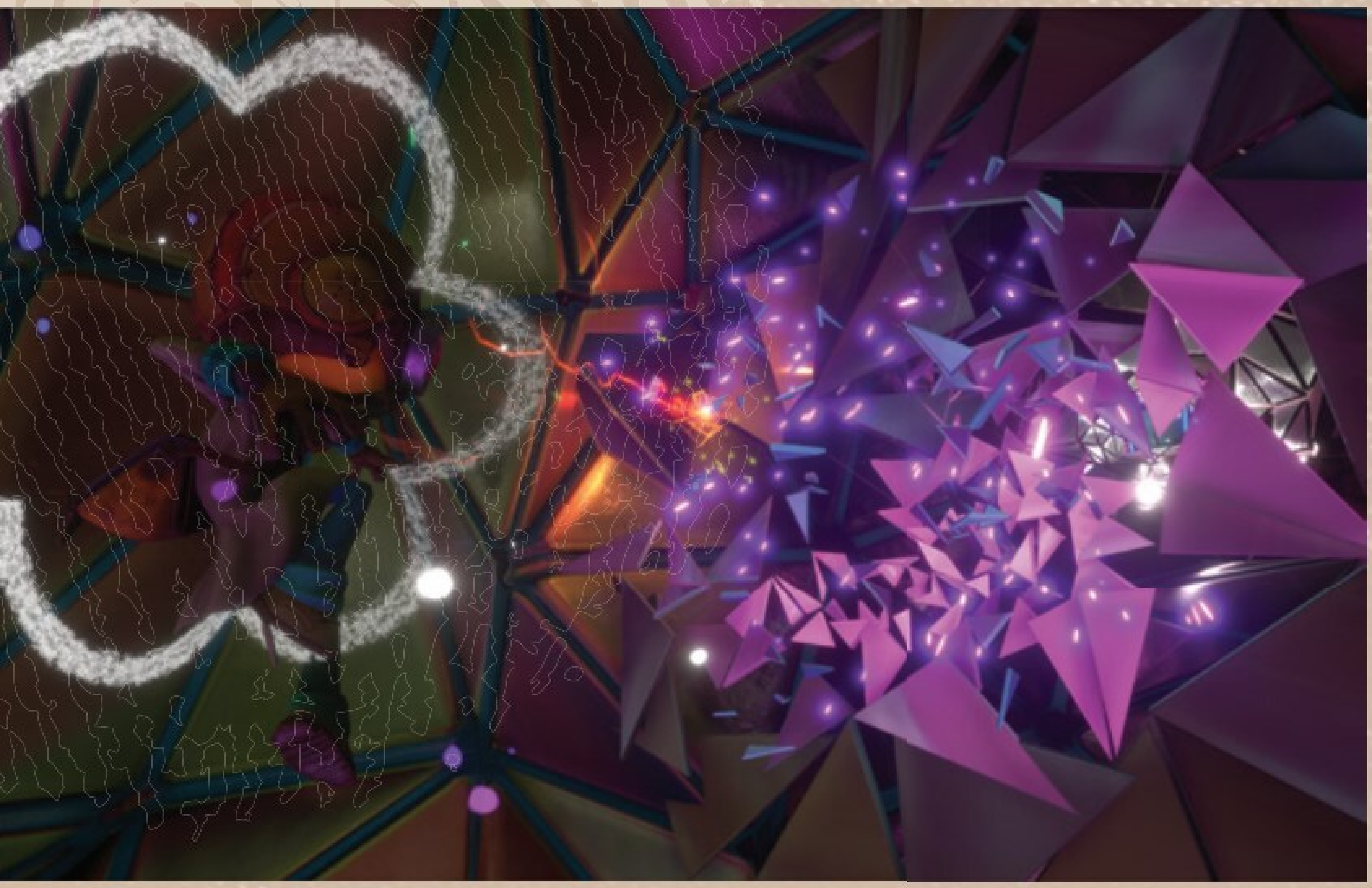


The Psychonauts own a lot of space, and the outer grounds include a dense forest grove




EMERGENCY
EMERGENCY ROOM

Censors are part of a mind's natural defense system, and they try to stamp out dangerous or harmful thoughts. They also take several forms, such as these hulking Strongarm Censors



Using Mental Connection, Raz reaches for an idea labeled “Cilantro” and zips to it. A band of purple energy trails behind him, connecting the idea for Delight with the idea for Cilantro. “That’s pretty powerful,” Schafer remarks. He’s not wrong. As soon as Raz connects the two thoughts, Hollis’ mind begins to generate new thoughts, and Raz can use them as grapple points and climb out of Hollis’ psychic classroom. Before long, Raz has entered Hollis’ larger subconscious.

“Mental Connection is a fun power, because it’s both a really visceral physical power like a grapple hook – flying through the level really fast and kinetic – but it also has a strong narrative meaning since you’re actually changing thoughts,” Schafer says. “It is something that can handle lock and key type puzzles, or it can handle physical motion, and it’s useful in combat. We tried to make all the psychic powers fire on all those levels.”

Soon after, we see Raz put Mental Connection to the test in combat. Hollis’ subconscious notices Raz mucking around in her brain and sends a few Censors to stop him. Censors are some of the most common enemies in Psychonauts. These squat, bespectacled defenders try to stamp out any mental invaders, but Raz makes quick work of them with a few psi-blasts. Censors aren’t the only enemies Raz has to contend with; a new creature called Bad Idea also gives him trouble. These rabbit-eared, bug-eyed monsters can generate bombs on their back, which they toss around the room with reckless abandon. Not only do these bombs explode on contact, but Bad Ideas can drop bombs on the battlefield like landmines.

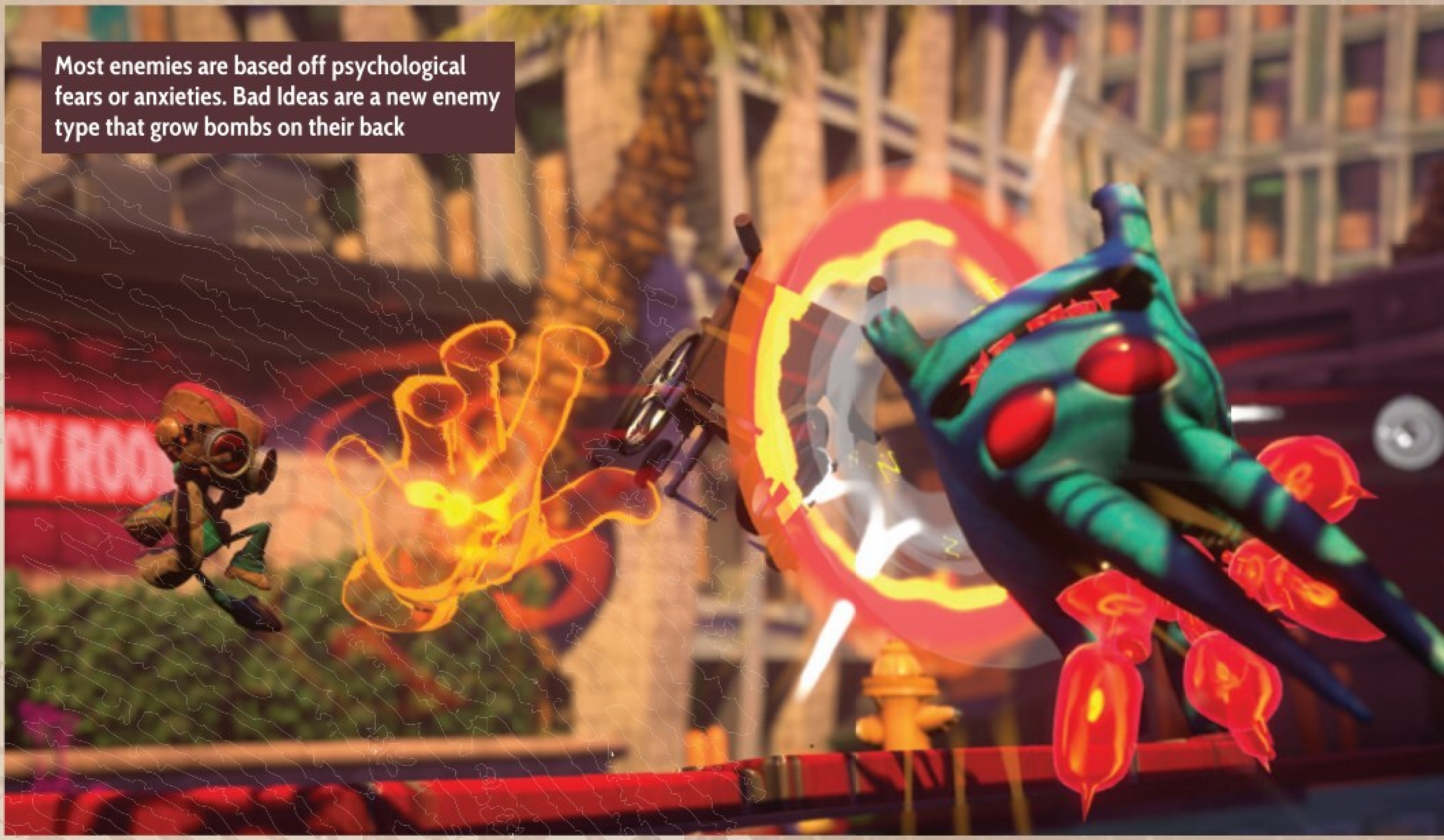
“For the Bad Idea, we really wanted a range-based enemy that could throw bombs, and we were looking for a unique way to do that that wasn’t exactly like taking something out of your pocket and tossing it,” Titre-Montgommery says. “The design you see now is very close to the original sketch by [concept artist] Scott Campbell. He homed in on the fact that [the Bad Idea] was growing his own bombs on his back and spitting them out. We thought that was a really cool concept, having an enemy that can auto-generate its own explosives and also feel cute at the same time.”

Raz gets to work battling the Bad Idea with a series of close-quarters attacks, but some of Raz’s long-range mental powers are more effective. The Bad Idea lobs a few bombs, and Raz snatches one explosive from the air using Telekinesis. Raz returns the bomb, which stuns the monster, then uses Mental Connection to pull his enemy closer for one final psi-blast combo. Mental Connection is great for repositioning enemies on the field.

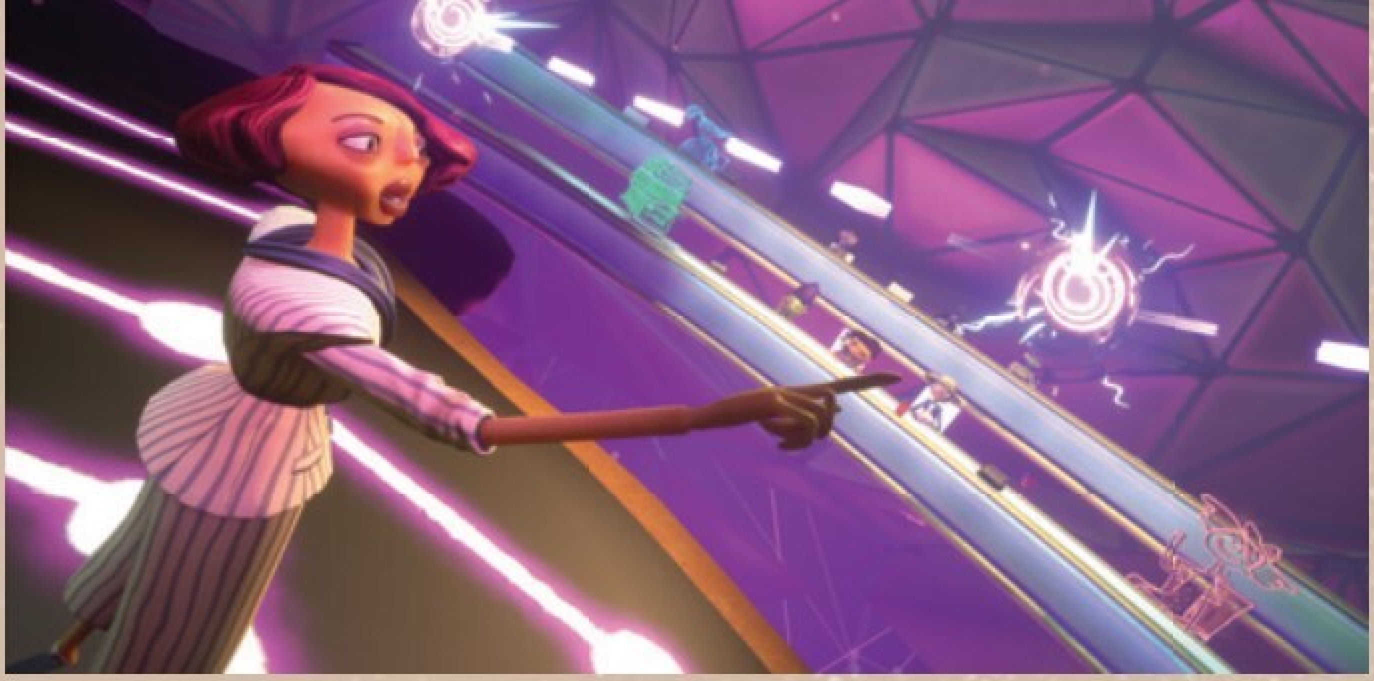
THE DARKER SIDE OF PSYCHONAUTS

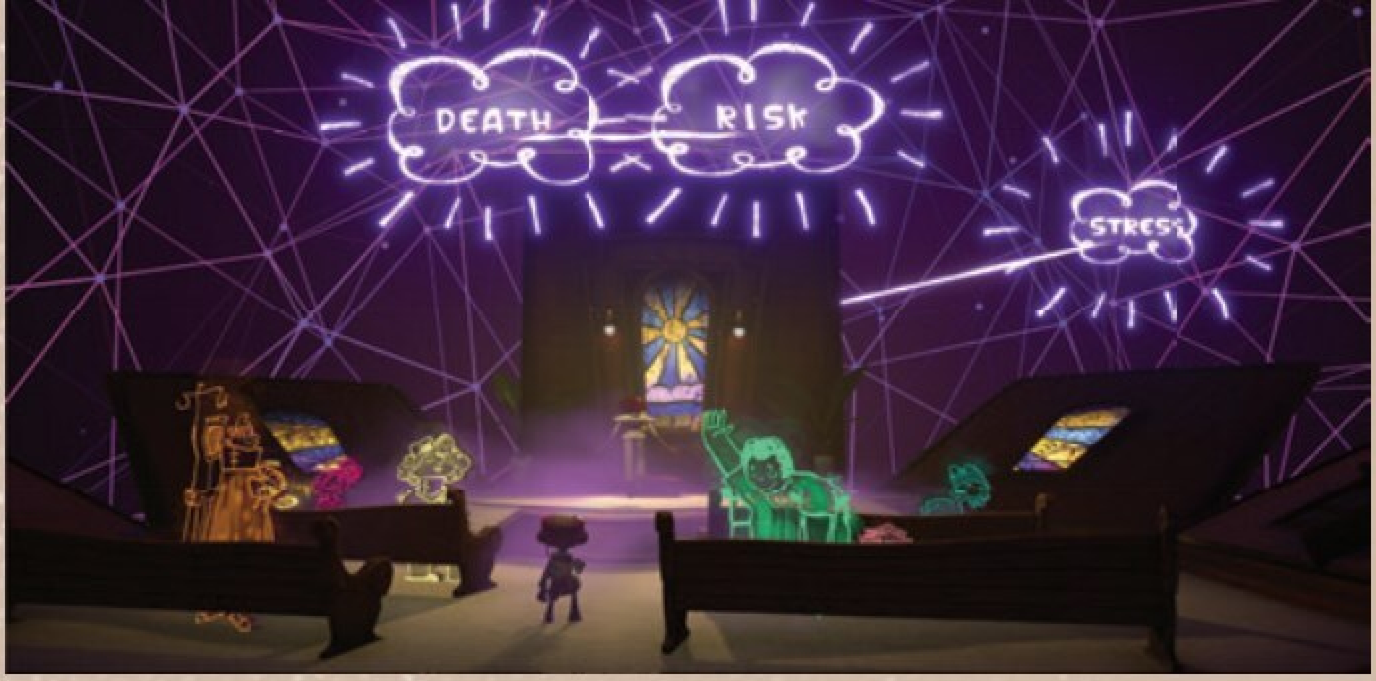
Psychonauts may be a cartoonish platformer full of goofy jokes, but that doesn’t mean Double Fine is shying away from serious topics. “There’s some themes in the game that I think most studios would be running away from,” says art director Lisette Titre-Montgommery. “For us, there’s some really uncomfortable things we have to explore in order to go through a person’s backstory.”

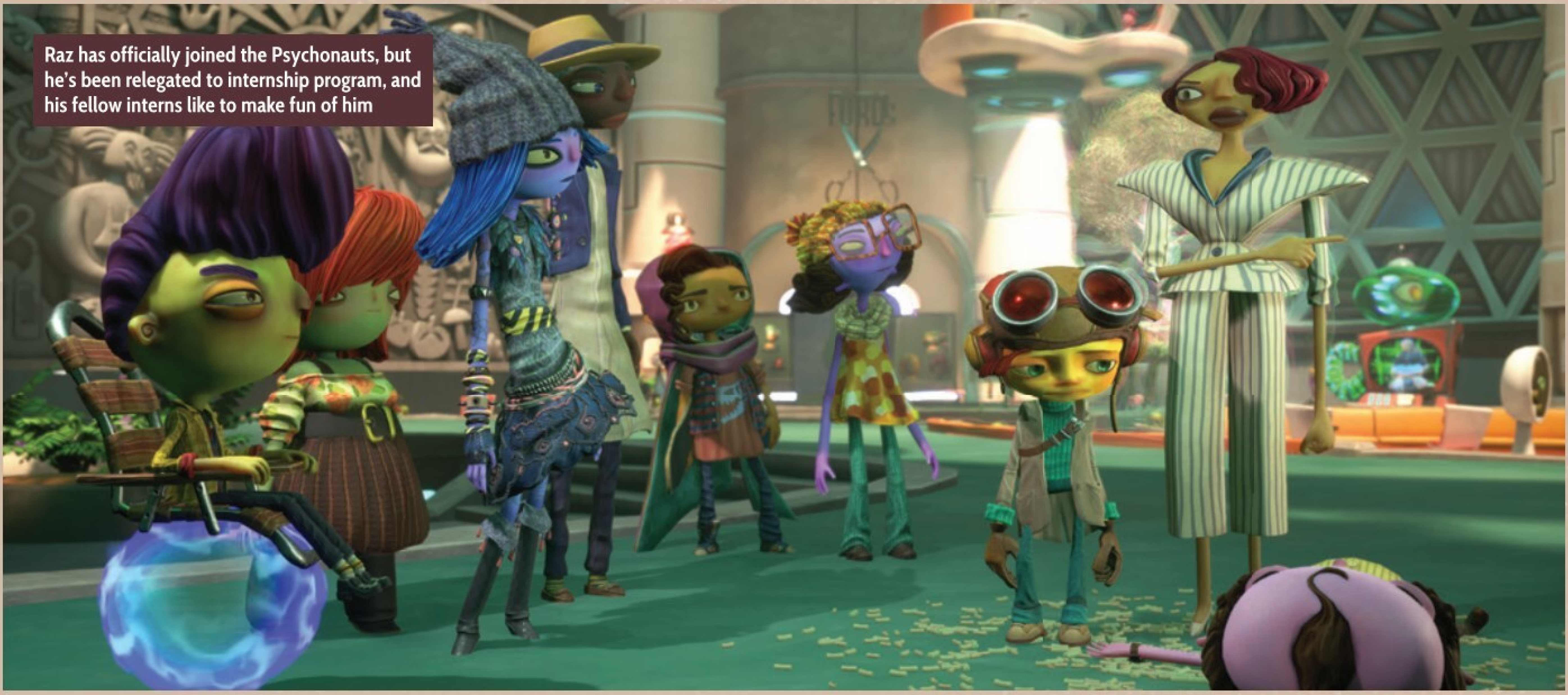
Studio head Tim Schafer added additional context by referencing one of the darker moments from the original Psychonauts. “In the first game, it’s very lighthearted and you’re in the disco level, and then you find a backroom where you find Mia’s memories of working in an orphanage that burnt down and there are the screams of children,” Schafer says. “Looking at it later, I was like, ‘Why did I put that in? That was so weird.’ Some people are shocked by it. Some people, it’s their favorite part of the game. They’re like, ‘That's when the game became something else to me.’ Psychonauts 2 is a lot like that, where it's a little bit like *Empire Strikes Back*. No, it’s a little bit like Monkey Island 2: LeChuck’s Revenge, where it’s bigger and a little darker than the first one.”



Most enemies are based off psychological fears or anxieties. Bad Ideas are a new enemy type that grow bombs on their back






Raz has officially joined the Psychonauts, but he's been relegated to internship program, and his fellow interns like to make fun of him

However, when he uses Mental Connection on heavier enemies, Raz might be the one who ends up getting pulled across the room. Either way, Mental Connection is helpful for quickly closing the gap between foes.

"We want to have the psychic powers be more useful in battle," Schafer says. "In the first game, you mostly just punched everything. In this game, every psychic power has some fun use in battle, and maybe an enemy who's susceptible to it. There's a lot more adapting your fight style to the enemies. In the first game, we put psychic powers in that people just forgot about, because you didn't have to use them, so we're trying to make it so all the psychic powers are useful all the time."

After defeating the Bad Idea, Raz continues to explore Hollis' mind and learns more about his teacher along the way. Raz discovers that Hollis used to be a doctor. In fact, her mind is themed like a hospital. Raz walks through a morgue-like corridor then platforms across a few X-ray slides. Figments of wheelchairs and prescription drugs float in the background.

"In her medical school times, Hollis had a disreputable professor, Dr. Potts, who stole her work," Schafer says. "She tried to use Mental Connection to make him not such an a-hole, and it actually ended up driving him a little – she went too far, and he had a big mental break. Truman Zanotto from the Psychonauts was called in to fix him, and that's when Truman recruited [Hollis]. He was like, 'You know, that was not great, but she's obviously very skilled and powerful in the ways of Mental Connection.'"

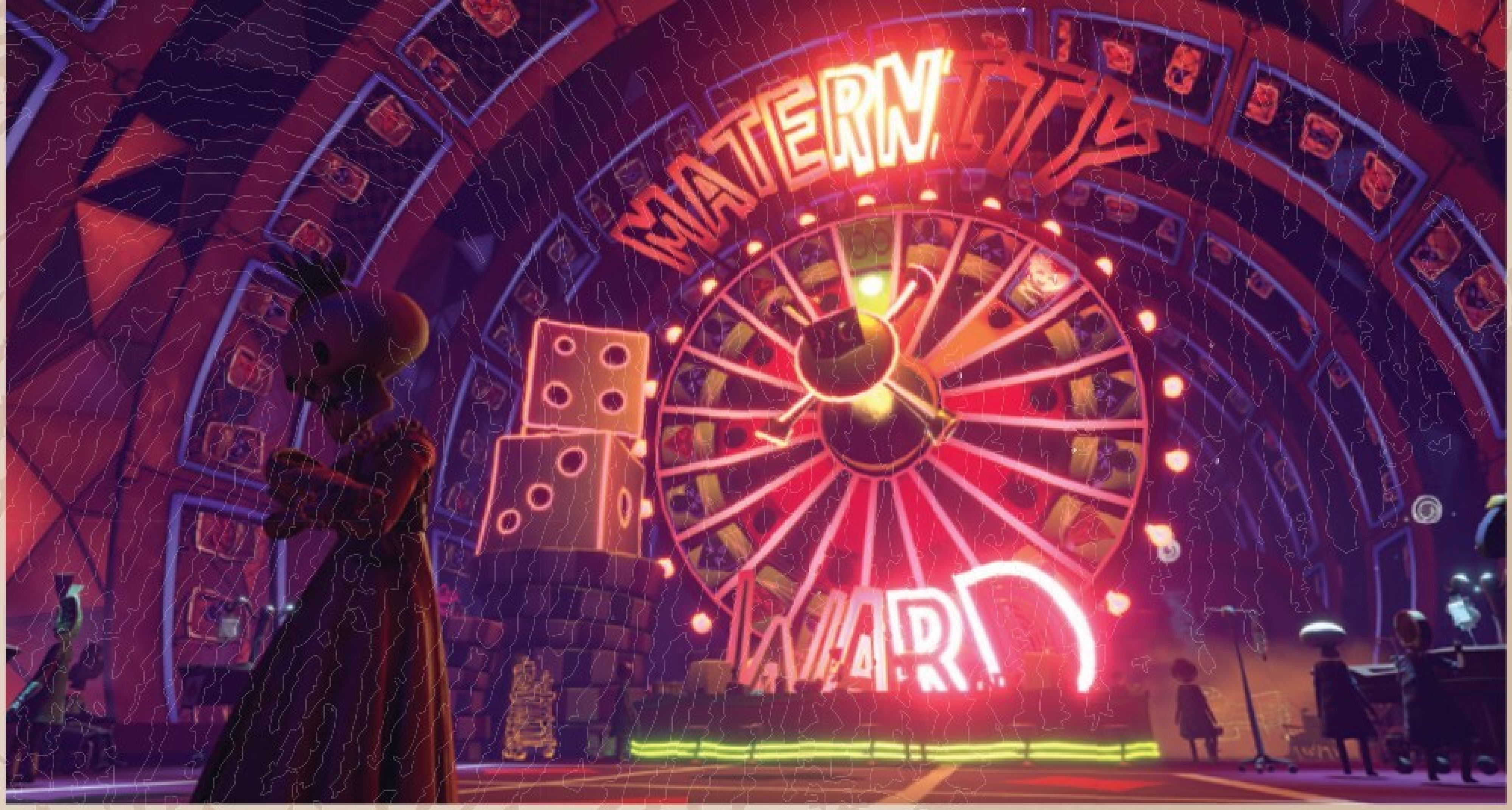
After more exploration, Raz eventually stumbles into Hollis' sanctuary, where she keeps some of her most strongly held beliefs. Overhead, Raz notices that the idea for Money is connected to the idea for Stress. Likewise, Death is linked to Risk. Raz reasons that if he can connect the idea for Risk to something other than Death, maybe Hollis won't feel so uncomfortable with him joining the official mission to rout out the Psychonauts' mole.

Raz uses his mental gymnastics to rewire Hollis' mind, and we hear her reflect on these new connections. "Ugh. Why do some people think I want to see their socks out in public?" Hollis asks when Raz connects Disgust to the idea for Socks with Sandals. After a bit of platforming, Raz finally reaches the thought for Money and when he joins that with Risk, Hollis' psyche begins to explode with new thoughts. Ideas like Proper Funding and Debt Relief appear. Hollis gets excited and her mind races with more new ideas, like Raises and New Programs. Raz changes Hollis' mind just like he wanted, but he also set off a powerful chain reaction. There is nothing left to do now but run.

"Raz notices that things are starting to expand out of control in her brain as she realizes that risk could be the solution to all her money problems," Schafer says. "It starts to form a bit of a monster in her mind."

Gisu
Norma
Lili

CARDIO
Racing



BRAIN SURGERY

One of the unique things about Psychonauts is that every single level has a particular theme. As Raz jumps into the minds of different people across the campaign, players get introduced to wildly different gameplay concepts and design aesthetics. In the original Psychonauts, Raz spent time destroying a tiny city as a kaiju monster, played a miniatures war game against Napoleon Bonaparte, and snuck past a group of shadowy G-men in a topsy-turvy 1950s suburbia. Psychonauts 2 is no different, and the few glimpses we've seen to date show levels based on everything from dental care to 1960s psychedelic art.

"Every single level essentially had its own pre-production process," Titre-Montgommery says. "Usually, a game has a pre-production phase, and then the studio moves to production, but because of the way our brain worlds work, we had to essentially start pre-production on every single brain over and over and over again. We needed each human brain to feel very different."

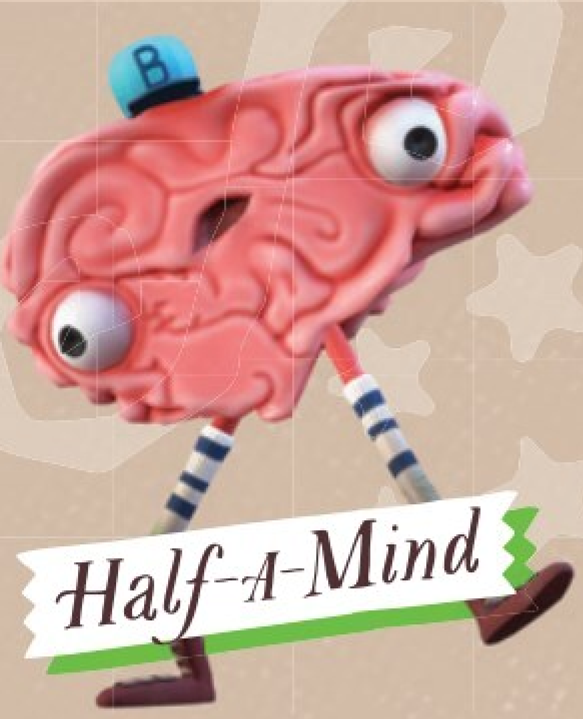
Psychonauts 2's wild tonal shifts keep the action fresh, but Double Fine's adorable art design provides cohesion between each world. "We wanted to make sure that the art really reflected how dreamscapy and unrealistic and unpredictable the human mind is," Titre-Montgommery says. "Psychonautical is a term we use because of how [that methodology] uses strong angles and shapes to disorient form, which helps you imagine dreamscapes. It breaks reality enough that you can buy into what we're selling."

Hollis' mind is the second level in the game and Double Fine themed her mind around how ideas can change a person. Ever since Raz linked Money with Risk, Hollis has become obsessed with gambling. On the one hand, this benefits Raz. Hollis is willing to take more risks, so she allows Raz to join the Psychonauts' official mission to hunt down the mole. On the other hand, Raz knows that he crossed a line and needs to put things back in order.

When Raz returns to Hollis' mind, he discovers that it has completely transformed. Before, it was themed around her hospital background. Her mind still vaguely resembles a hospital, but now it is drenched in neon and full of Las Vegas trappings. Raz discovers that he can't re-enter her mental sanctuary unless he completes three gambling-themed minigames and earns three gazillion dollars to become a "high-roller."

As Raz completes his quests, he encounters a variety of collectibles. Like any good platformer, Psychonauts features a wild assortment of items for players to vacuum up. Classics from the first game return, such as the unfinished thoughts from people's minds called figments. These are the most common collectible, but rarer treasures such as PSI Cards and PSI Cores allow Raz to expand his psychic abilities. Meanwhile, vaults unlock special narrative sequences that provide additional insight about the people Raz telepathically invades. At one point in our demo, Raz picks up a new collectible called Half-A-Mind, a little dancing brain in a top hat. When Raz collects two Half-A-Minds he'll have a complete brain, which expands his health pool.

Another important collectible, called Nuggets of Wisdom, allows Raz to rank up. With each new level, Raz can upgrade his psychic abilities. When he improves his skills, they naturally become more powerful, but they may also gain new features. For example, if Raz upgrades his Pyrokinesis, his fire will burn hotter and last longer. If he upgrades his Psi Blast, he can charge the attack to unleash a larger explosion. And if he boosts his basic melee attack, he eventually learns a ground pound that produces a radiating shockwave that pushes enemies back.



Half-A-Mind

A SHORT RUNDOWN OF RAZ'S PSYCHIC POWERS

TELEKINESIS – Raz uses his mind to lift and throw objects, which comes in handy against enemies

PYROKINESIS – A focused, combustible blast of energy, great for burning down obstacles

PSI BLAST – A concentrated beam of mental energy that deals physical damage

CLAIRVOYANCE – By focusing on a person or animal, Raz can see the world from their point of view, which may reveal hidden details in the environment

LEVITATION – An invisible force that allows Raz to jump higher and glide great distances. Raz can concentrate this energy into a ball, which he can run atop, allowing him to traverse open areas more quickly

MENTAL CONNECTION – A grappling hook-like beam that allows Raz to pull himself towards floating platforms and enemies. Can also be used to connect disparate ideas in people's minds

Psychonauts' art style was inspired by everything from filmmaker Tim Burton to the German Expressionism movement

After working his way through the mental casino, Raz finally collects three gazillion dollars and is ready to re-enter Hollis' mental sanctuary. Unfortunately, Hollis' greed monster has now manifested as a lightbulb-studded octopus called Lady Luctopus. This boss fight takes place on top of a giant blackjack table, and Raz skillfully jumps across piles of poker chips as he dodges tentacles and a few ground attacks that electrify the floor.

Once Raz defeats Lady Luctopus, he restores Hollis' mind to normal and saves her from financial ruin at the gambling tables. Unfortunately, the Psychonauts' mission to uncover the mole wasn't as successful. Not only did they fail to discover the identity of the spy, but the group found a few disturbing details about this mysterious force. This mole has been researching ancient necromantic rituals and seems to be planning to resurrect an ancient murderous evil that would threaten the safety of every psychic on the planet. But, you'll have to wait until Psychonauts 2 hits later this year to learn more about that.

A MIND-BLOWING BRAIN GAME

When Double Fine released the original Psychonauts in 2005, colorful 3D platformers were on the decline. These days the genre seems even less relevant, and few publishers outside of Nintendo even attempt games like this. But all that just goes to show how much of a passion project Psychonauts 2 is for the studio.

"The original Psychonauts will always be special," Schafer says. "We always call it our flagship title, and we care about it a lot – we care about all the games that we've made, just that it'll always be special in that way. I've always felt that we're completely untied, untethered to anything. We always want our game to be surprising."

Psychonauts 2 might not be the first in a new franchise, but when fans get their hands on the title they're bound to be surprised. Double Fine has spent nearly six years packing Raz's next journey full of exciting moments. Not only has the studio refined its platforming controls and dreamed up a host of wacky new worlds for players to explore, but the team has better integrated Raz's superhuman powers into the game's puzzles, exploration, and combat. Psychonauts 2 offers a rich narrative full of incredible psychic superpowers and lovable characters, but some players might discover even greater meaning at the heart of this story.

Aaron
Truman
Sam

"In the first game, there are all these people that you would write off as villainous or weird or crazy, and then you go into their minds and you see what they're struggling with, and you help them," Schafer says. "We were in the recording studio and Khris Brown, our casting director, said, 'You know, every level is like a different experience of healing.' And it's something that I wouldn't have said was our purpose when I started the first game, but looking back on it, it seemed true … It's weird to talk about Psychonauts as a mental health game, because it's a comedy; it's not a textbook in mental health or anything, but I feel like it has a good heart. It tries to get to the issue that we all have – these internal struggles – and you shouldn't judge someone by how they behave on the outside because you never know what they're struggling with inside."

If Psychonauts 2 achieves anything half as noble as that, it will have been well worth the 16-year wait. ◆

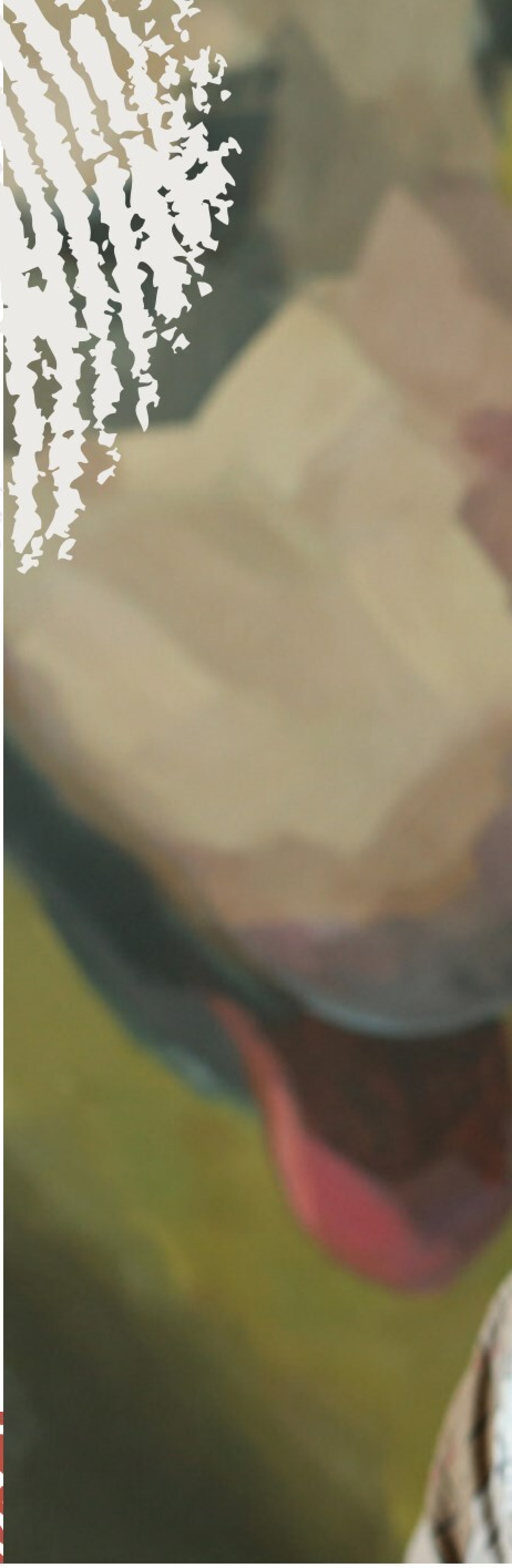
For more on Psychonauts 2, including exclusive video interviews with the team and a talk with Double Fine's mental health expert, head over to gameinformer.com/Psychonauts2

Dr. Loboto
Judge

INSIDE THE MIND OF TIM SCHAFER

How LucasArts shaped one of the game industry's most creative talents

by Ben Reeves



Tim Schafer likes *Star Wars*. But as far as he's concerned, Lucasfilm's video games were the company's greatest creative output. In the early '80s, George Lucas' burgeoning computer division explored a few forms of entertainment outside of the movie industry. In 1984, the company released a sci-fi-inspired sports game called Ballblazer as well as a primordial first-person shooter set in space called Rescue on Fractalus! To Schafer, these games were a revelation. The video game industry, on the whole, seemed almost magical.

"I was there at the beginning," Schafer says. "I remember my dad bringing home a Magnavox Odyssey, the first home arcade console ever and just being so fascinated with it. Sometimes it feels funny to explain to people why it's exciting to see things moving on a screen. I'm trying to talk to my daughter about it. She's grown up with smartphones, and I'm like, 'No, you don't understand. TV was controlled by other people, and then you could make dots move on it!' It was so fascinating."

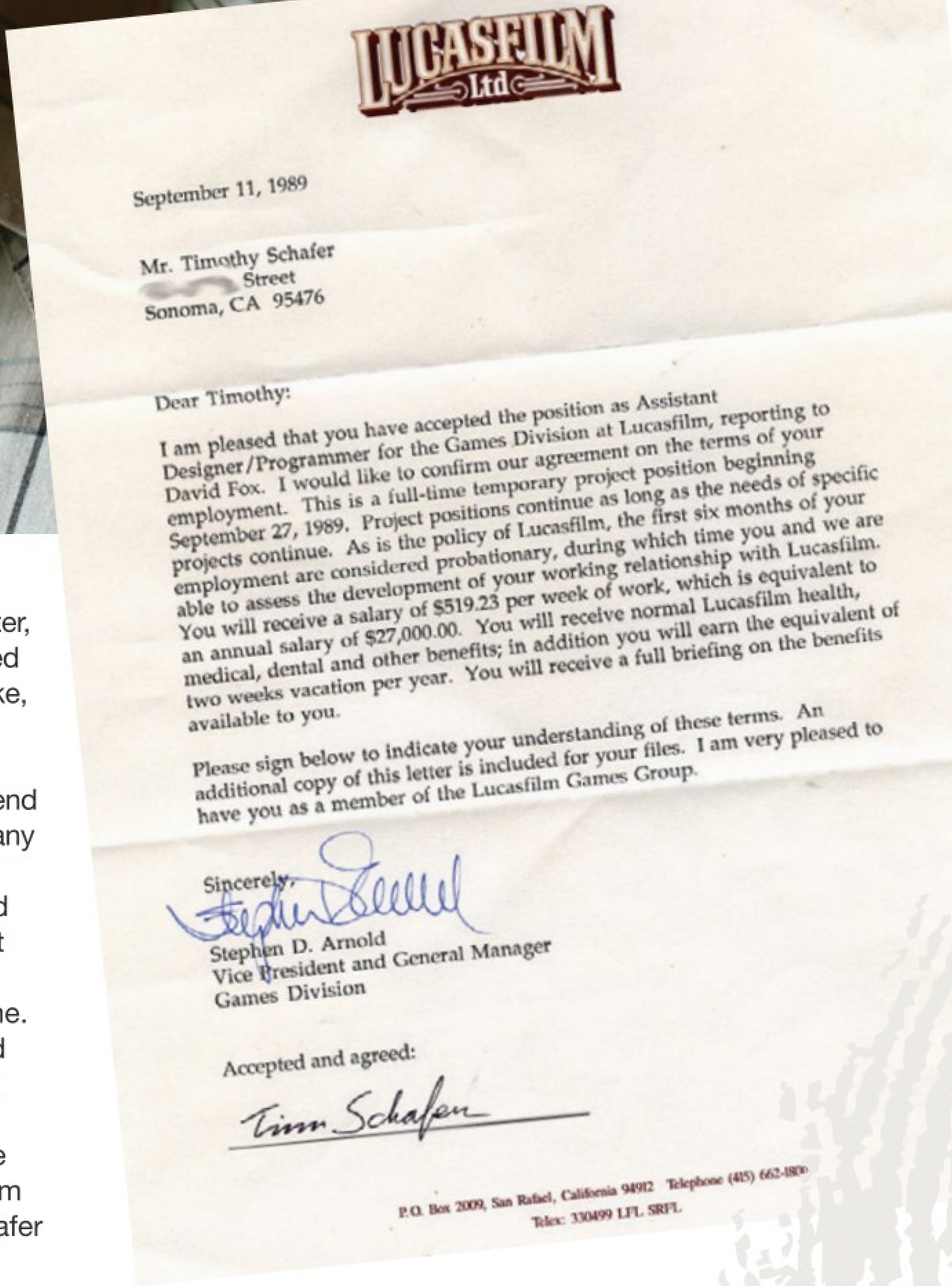
Schafer quickly became a video game fan. He devoured text adventures such as Zork, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, and Scott Adams' Savage Island series. After his dad brought home a few Atari consoles as well as an Atari Computer, Schafer began experimenting with designing his own games, but he didn't initially think about pursuing a job in the video game industry. In college, Schafer studied computer science, however, he was most passionate about creative writing. Authors like Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions*) were his icons, and he dreamed of being a writer.

"I thought I would write short stories and get a job at a database programming [company]," Schafer says. "All the jobs back then were database programmers … I loved video games, but, in my head, they were made by companies. I would think of Atari as, 'Oh, it's this big, monolithic building full of scientists and robots and some big, massive brain.' But I realized later, 'Woah, they were just young kids. They were young programmers all by themselves making these games.'"

One day, a friend told Schafer that Lucasfilm Games (rebranded to LucasArts in 1990) was looking for developers who could program and write. Schafer felt that he had unknowingly been preparing for a dream job his entire life. He thought back to the days he spent playing LucasArts games on his Atari, and he knew he didn't want to pass up this opportunity. He just had to nail the interview.

"I had a bad phone interview with David Fox [the designer and programmer behind Rescue on Fractalus! and Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders]," Schafer says. "He was really nice, but he asked me what Lucasfilm Games I had played, and I told him I really liked the games I had played on my Atari 800, like Ballblaster. He was like, 'Ballblaster, huh? That's what Ballblazer was called when it was pirated.' [laughs] I was like, 'Oh, God. He got me there because I had a disc of all their pirated games. Piracy's bad, kids. Don't do it. You'll end up like me and have your own company and stuff."

While Schafer was convinced he'd blown the initial interview, he wasn't deterred, and spent several nights crafting a perfect cover letter/resume. In a cheeky nod to the job he hoped to one day attain, Schafer designed his letter to look like an early-'80s graphical adventure game complete with ASCII art depicting the Lucasfilm campus. Interview be damned, Schafer got the job.



LUCASFILM
Ltd

September 11, 1989

Mr. Timothy Schafer
[redacted] Street
Sonoma, CA 95476

Dear Timothy:

I am pleased that you have accepted the position as Assistant Designer/Programmer for the Games Division at Lucasfilm, reporting to David Fox. I would like to confirm our agreement on the terms of your employment. This is a full-time temporary project position beginning September 27, 1989. Project positions continue as long as the needs of specific projects continue. As is the policy of Lucasfilm, the first six months of your employment are considered probationary, during which time you and we are able to assess the development of your working relationship with Lucasfilm. You will receive a salary of $519.23 per week of work, which is equivalent to an annual salary of $27,000.00. You will receive normal Lucasfilm health, medical, dental and other benefits; in addition you will earn the equivalent of two weeks vacation per year. You will receive a full briefing on the benefits available to you.

Please sign below to indicate your understanding of these terms. An additional copy of this letter is included for your files. I am very pleased to have you as a member of the Lucasfilm Games Group.

Sincerely,

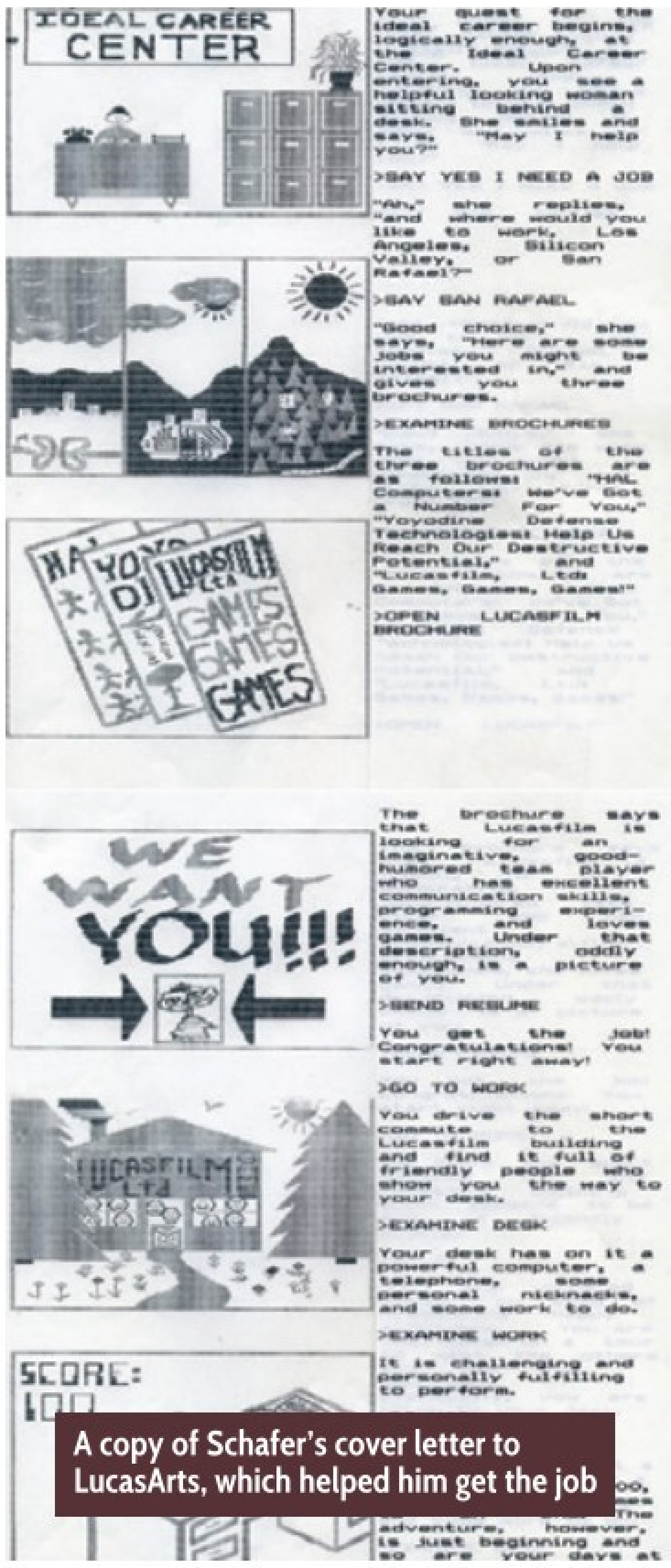
Stephen D. Arnold
Vice President and General Manager
Games Division

Accepted and agreed:

Tim Schafer

P.O. Box 2009, San Rafael, California 94912 Telephone (415) 662-1800
Telex: 330499 LFL SRFL

Schafer and his LucasArts family celebrate the release of The Secret of Monkey Island, which is still considered one of the most important adventure games of all time



IDEAL CAREER CENTER
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WE WANT YOU!!!
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SCORE:

Your quest for the ideal career begins, logically enough, at the Ideal Career Center. Upon entering, you see a helpful looking woman sitting behind a desk. She smiles and says, "May I help you?"

>SAY YES I NEED A JOB

"Ah," she replies, "and where would you like to work, Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, or San Rafael?"

>SAY SAN RAFAEL

"Good choice," she says, "Here are some jobs you might be interested in," and gives you three brochures.

>EXAMINE BROCHURES

The titles of the three brochures are as follows: "HAL Computers: We've Got a Number For You," "Yoyodine Defense Technologies: Help Us Reach Our Destructive Potential," and "Lucasfilm, Ltd: Games, Games, Games!"

>OPEN LUCASFILM BROCHURE

The brochure says that Lucasfilm is looking for an imaginative, good-humored team player who has excellent communication skills, programming experience, and loves games. Under that description, oddly enough, is a picture of you.

>SEND RESUME

You get the job! Congratulations! You start right away!

>GO TO WORK

You drive the short commute to the Lucasfilm building and find it full of friendly people who show you the way to your desk.

>EXAMINE DESK

Your desk has on it a powerful computer, a telephone, some personal nicknacks, and some work to do.

>EXAMINE WORK

It is challenging and personally fulfilling to perform.

adventure, however, is just beginning and so are your days at

A copy of Schafer's cover letter to LucasArts, which helped him get the job

LIFE ON THE RANCH

After the success of *Star Wars*, George Lucas built Skywalker Ranch near Nicasio, Calif., to function as his personal movie development workshop. The grounds contained an animal barn, outdoor swimming pool, fitness center, vineyard, and gardens full of fruits and vegetables for the onsite gourmet restaurant to use. When Schafer joined Lucasfilm in 1989, the campus also housed a motion picture mixing facility and served as the corporate offices for the studio's many accountants and lawyers.

"It was amazing!" Schafer says. "I mean, right out of college, to go to work at Skywalker Ranch, you know? This was before *Episode 1* was even imagined, so this was *Star Wars* in the magic times … there were a lot of celebrities around Skywalker Ranch. Jack Nicholson stopped by. Pearl Jam would record records there. At one point, Michael Jackson was at the Fourth of July picnic. You had to get used to like, 'Don't go up to people. Don't bother them. Be cool around celebrities.'"

Lucasfilm's computer and game division was tucked into the back of the Ranch's facilities, but Schafer still found it to be a near-idyllic workspace. Over coffee breaks, he could walk out on the balcony and watch deer graze in the field. When he returned to his desk, he and his cohorts would joke around and talk about their favorite computer games. "It had a really well-funded startup kind of vibe, and then at lunch, you'd walk down to the main house, this beautiful Victorian, where there was gourmet food for $3 a day," Schafer says.

However, Schafer's time at the Ranch didn't last long as some of the higher-ups at Lucasfilm eventually got fed up with the rowdy antics coming from the games team. "They kicked us out because games people do things that they don't like at the Ranch, like ordering pizza at midnight and being a little bit rowdier," Schafer says, laughing.

Schafer and the rest of the LucasArts team moved into the Kerner Complex in San Rafael, Calif. The building was also home to the movie special effects giant Industrial Light & Magic. At the time, ILM was working on films such as *The Hunt for Red October*, *Back to the Future Part III*, and *Total Recall*. The practical effects for many of these films required a lot of model work, and Schafer remembers watching scale figures of World War II bombers exploding outside his office windows.

"Fun things would happen," Schafer says. "They'd be like, 'Hey, anyone wanna be an extra? It pays 50 bucks. You'll be an extra in *Die Hard 2*.' We ran out there [at] 11 at night to 3 in the morning and just walked around this field with fake snow. They filmed us walking in different directions and put potato flakes on our shoulders."

Schafer's time at LucasArts was unforgettable, but it wasn't all fun and games. He had been hired to complete some serious work … work that also involved a lot of fun and games. As it would turn out, Schafer's creative output over the next several years would result in some of the most beloved adventure games of all time.

Schafer in *Die Hard 2*

Schafer takes in the grounds of Skywalker Ranch, George Lucas' personal production studio

> "I was so scared by this crazy idea, and then, of course, it turned out to be that the insult sword fighting is some people's favorite part of Monkey Island, and it's this classic thing. That was another example of just how afraid you are sometimes of ideas that don't fit. Learning to run with them was an important lesson."

MONKEYING AROUND

Before Schafer joined LucasArts, George Lucas had licensed the Star Wars video games to companies like Atari. This meant Lucas' own employees couldn't produce games connected to the company's massive blockbuster franchise. "They're like, 'You guys have to just make up stuff; we can't do Star Wars,'" Schafer says. "It was this golden age of having access to a big chunk of George's money and just being told to make up stuff from scratch."

Star Wars games may have been off the table, but that suited Schafer just fine; he was more excited by the prospect of working on strange, original ideas. As soon as Schafer started, he met a brilliant young designer named Ron Gilbert who was already working on a point-and-click adventure game called Mutiny on Monkey Island – later retitled The Secret of Monkey Island. Schafer joined the team, spending days researching serious pirate lore and reading books like *Treasure Island* to get into the right headspace. However, when Gilbert asked Schafer to write dialogue for the game, Schafer hesitated. Instead, he wrote a couple of jokes about a three-headed monkey, which got a laugh out of fellow game designer Dave Grossman.

"I was like, 'Later, Ron will come up and he'll write the real dialogue, which will be serious pirate lore,'" Schafer says. "And then Ron came up and he played it, he's like, 'Oh, that's funny.' I was like, 'I'll put something serious in there later.' And he [goes], 'No, that's the dialogue. That's the dialogue for the game.' I was like, 'You're gonna leave the three-headed monkey line in there?' He goes, 'Yeah. And you know what? We should get [LucasArts artist] Steve Purcell to draw a three-headed monkey and put it back there.' I was like, 'Are you kidding?' I was terrified that this raw, silly joke was going in there.

"I still had that image in my head of the big building full of scientists and robots that made games, like some super smart brain that knows what they're doing. And then you get in it and you realize everyone's just like you. People are smarter than you, for sure, but not like a different species of smart. So yeah, I didn't think the game would be super serious, but I thought it would be, I don't know, I thought some adult was going to come along and write the real dialogue."

Later, when the team was designing combat for Monkey Island, Schafer felt like they hit a wall. Early concepts were based on Jordan Mechner's fighting game Karateka and featured high, low, and medium attacks that players could counter using high, low, and medium blocks. The team even spent time watching several classic Errol Flynn films for inspiration. However, the group never felt like the sword-fighting mechanics were a good fit for their adventure game. Gilbert eventually had the revelation that the dueling mechanic should be based on a war of words where players chose snappy comebacks and insults as a way of attacking their opponent.

"I was like, 'You can't – people want to swordfight! They're gonna be so mad,'" Schafer says. "I was so scared by this crazy idea, and then, of course, it turned out to be that the insult sword fighting is some people's favorite part of Monkey Island, and it's this classic thing. That was another example of just how afraid you are sometimes of ideas that don't fit. Learning to run with them was an important lesson."

After working on The Secret of Monkey Island and Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge, Schafer moved into the role of co-director, alongside Dave Grossman. The two created Day of the Tentacle, a bizarre adventure game about a group of young friends and their time-traveling adventure to stop a sentient, disembodied tentacle from taking over the world.

TIM SCHAFER:

On Being A Game Writer

"Kurt Vonnegut, his thing was that he wrote short stories when he was starting out working at GE. So, early on I was like, 'Okay, I'll get that database programming job and at night I'll write short stories.' I still have never really – except for [one story in college] – I don't think I've ever really finished a short story outside of that. I was like, 'Okay, I'll work on this games job for a while until I become a famous writer like Kurt Vonnegut.' A couple years into it, I was like, 'Hey, I'm getting paid to write. This is a writing job. I'm getting paid and I'm writing dialogue and I actually am a professional writer.' It took me a long time to accept that I was working as a writer."

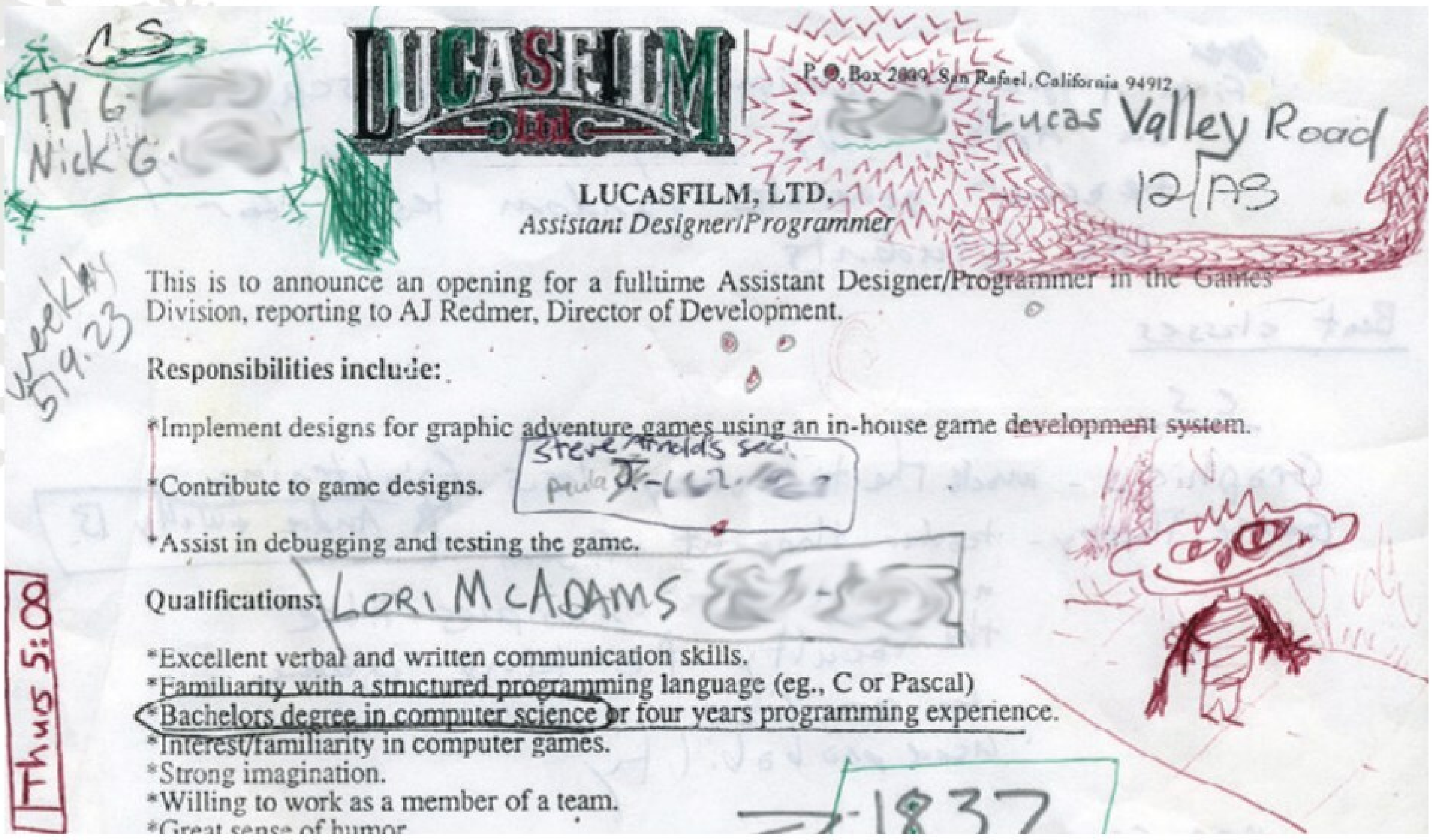
"I used to talk about Day of the Tentacle as being the last fun game to work on," Schafer says. "I always liked the games after, but that was the last time it felt easy because we didn't have 3D and we didn't do voice … The brainstorming sessions were so fun because we'd just spend all afternoon in a room eating candy and telling jokes and accidentally designing a couple puzzles a day. Those were really fun."

Schafer became the lone director on his next project, Full Throttle. LucasArts hoped Full Throttle would revolutionize the adventure game genre, and Schafer had the freedom to craft a more serious story about near-future biker gangs and corporate espionage. Schafer and his team moved into the offices that once housed Pixar and got to work modernizing their traditionally convoluted mechanics into a streamlined point-and-click interface. At one point, Schafer designed an interactive sequence where Full Throttle's protagonist underwent a peyote-induced hallucination. This sequence was cut from the game, but some of its concepts eventually took shape in the Psychonauts series.

Around this time, Schafer also continued to refine his writing style and prove himself as more than just a humorist. Where The Secret of Monkey Island and Day of the Tentacle were off-the-wall cartoons, games like Full Throttle featured unique, detailed worlds full of compelling characters. Schafer began to understand that he could tell funny stories that still had heart and said something meaningful. Of course, as any artist will tell you, creating anything of value is hard.

"There are lot of writers that have shot themselves; I think I know why," Schafer says. "And that's probably something I should learn [to deal with] better, because [writing] can be really isolating … When you do something creative, it's one thing to just output your own creative ideas, but to be able to explain them, why you're doing it – I'm not even clear why I'm doing half the stuff I'm doing. It's hard to sit in a room and be like, 'I think the reason I'm making this joke here is that three-headed monkeys are funny.' And what if someone was like, 'I think it should be a four-headed monkey!' Being able to have that conversation is a skill that people have to learn."

Many of the jokes in Schafer's early LucasArts adventure games came about as the team goofed off in their office, trying to make each other laugh



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TY G [redacted]
Nick G [redacted]

LUCASFILM Ltd

P. O. Box 2009, San Rafael, California 94912

[redacted] Lucas Valley Road
12/AB

LUCASFILM, LTD.
Assistant Designer/Programmer

weekly
519.23

This is to announce an opening for a fulltime Assistant Designer/Programmer in the Games Division, reporting to AJ Redmer, Director of Development.

Responsibilities include:

*Implement designs for graphic adventure games using an in-house game development system.

Steve Arnold's sec.
paula X-162-[redacted]

*Contribute to game designs.

*Assist in debugging and testing the game.

Qualifications: LORI MCADAMS [redacted]

*Excellent verbal and written communication skills.
*Familiarity with a structured programming language (eg., C or Pascal)
*Bachelors degree in computer science or four years programming experience.
*Interest/familiarity in computer games.
*Strong imagination.
*Willing to work as a member of a team.
*Great sense of humor

Thus 5:00

X-1837

After Full Throttle, Schafer worked on a film noir-inspired adventure called Grim Fandango, which followed a travel agent for the dead named Manny Calavera on a multi-year journey across the underworld. Like Full Throttle, Schafer hoped to expand the definition of an adventure game. Grim Fandango combined Aztec beliefs of the afterlife with a 1930s Art Deco aesthetic to produce an incredibly striking visual style. The game's environments were built using a mix of pre-rendered 2D backgrounds and 3D character models, which allowed the team to design new kinds of puzzles that encouraged players to explore the world. When Grim Fandango launched in October 1998, it received rave reviews and a few "Game of the Year" nods. Schafer didn't know it at the time, but it would be his last project with LucasArts.

> "The brainstorming sessions were so fun because we'd just spend all afternoon in a room eating candy and telling jokes and accidentally designing a couple puzzles a day."

Schafer has hosted the Game Developers Choice Awards a number of times during his career. He also received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the organization in 2018

TIM SCHAFER:

On Classic Cartoons

"We got to meet [renowned Warner Bros. animation director] Chuck Jones because he was a big inspiration on the style of Day of the Tentacle. We met with him because I think we were hoping he would say a blurb for the box – like some endorsement – but we never came out and asked him for it, so he never did [laughs] ... It was marketing's idea. We were just so excited about meeting him, we forgot to ask. But he liked the game. It was nice that Chuck Jones liked it. If you've ever seen [the animated cartoon short] *Duck Amuck*, I feel like *Duck Amuck* has influenced every game I've ever made. It's Bugs Bunny torturing Daffy Duck with his pen and his eraser and drawing anvils to drop on his head. Warner Bros. cartoons and growing up with surrealism, I think affected a whole generation of creators ... Playing with your perception is something we do in Psychonauts all the time. It's basic Roadrunner logic."

UNDER THE SHADOW OF STAR WARS

In the mid-'90s, the rights to Star Wars games had reverted to LucasArts, and by the turn of the millennium the company was ramping up production on a series of games to support the release of the *Star Wars* prequel films. Schafer watched the tide at Lucasfilm turn from supporting original ideas to focusing on expanding a singular science-fantasy universe. While Full Throttle and Grim Fandango had been critical darlings, their market value couldn't compete with one of the biggest media franchises on the planet.

"Some people in management really didn't like the adventure games because they were not huge moneymakers," Schafer says. "Especially once they started making Star Wars games … They were like, 'Hey, Tim, after Grim, why don't you just make a PS2 game?' That was their code for some sort of actiony kind of game. And I kind of wanted to, too. 'Yeah, sure. I'll make a console game. I'll take all of the things we know from adventure games – the dialogue and story and characters and stuff – but it'll just be easier to use and interact with.'"

Throughout the '90s, Schafer played Super Mario 64, Final Fantasy VII, and the original Tomb Raider games. Those experiences awakened an excitement in him to explore fully-realized 3D worlds. Inspired by those titles, he began work on a spy-themed game that was a mix of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the '70s spy thriller *Three Days of the Condor*, and the Hong Kong wire-fu movies of Jet Li. Schafer continued to play with the idea of letting players travel deeper into their minds to meditate on objects to progress the story – circling concepts that would finally see the light of day in Psychonauts years later.

However, after a year of prototyping this space-age spy game, Schafer felt like it was time to move on from the company that had given him a career. He wanted more flexibility over his company culture and the freedom to pursue any project that sparked his imagination. If he'd stayed much longer at LucasArts, he might have been asked to create a Star Wars or Indiana Jones game, which could have been fun, but he didn't feel like he had the appropriate skills to play in someone else's world.

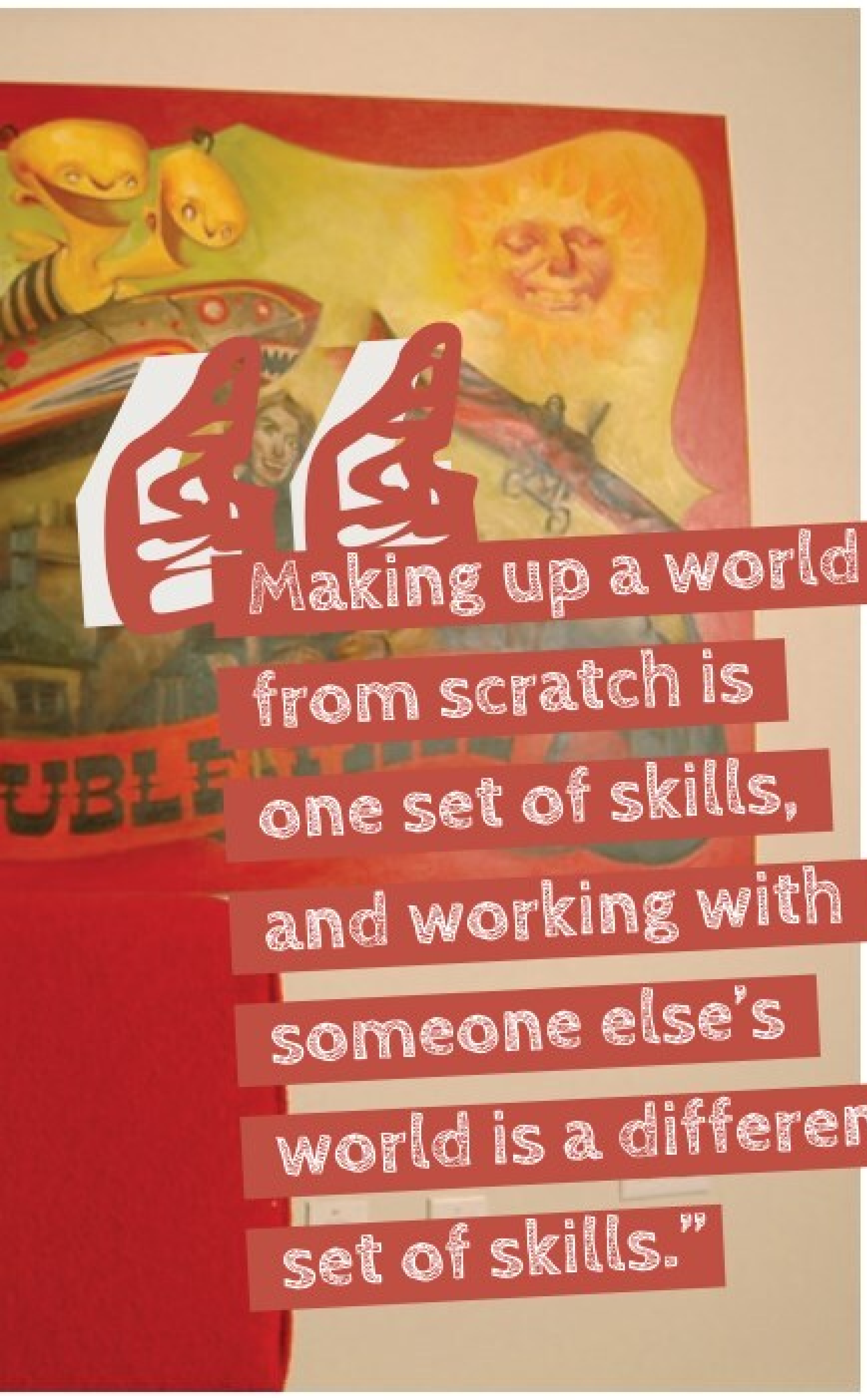
"Making up a world from scratch is one set of skills, and working with someone else's world is a different set of skills … Before [*Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*] shipped, licensing was like, 'These characters can't have lightsabers; they're not Jedi.'

TIM SCHAFER:

On Heavy Metal

"I've always loved heavy metal. We'd talk in high school about, 'What's the difference between hard rock and heavy metal?' We were like, 'Well, heavy metal is about madness, loneliness, darkness, and insanity. And hard rock is about partying and sex.' That's the big difference. I think about that. Why was I so drawn to the themes in heavy metal, which are always really dark? Everything by Black Sabbath – all of [bassist and lyricist] Geezer Butler's lyrics are mostly about the fear of going insane. And that's had an influence."

Schafer and actor Jack Black during a promotional tour for Double Fine's Brütal Legend

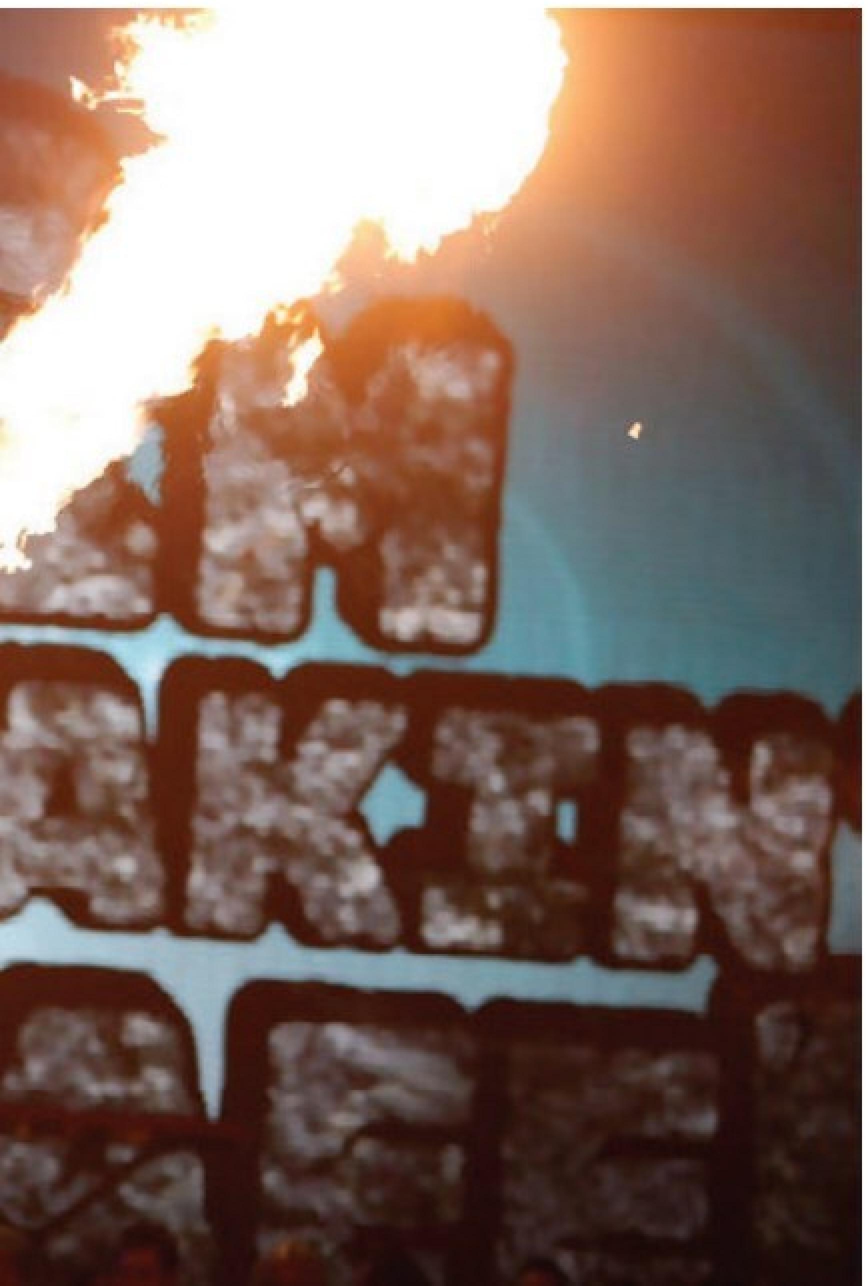


> “Making up a world from scratch is one set of skills, and working with someone else’s world is a different set of skills.”

TIM SCHAFER:

On Development Crunch

“People often ask, ‘Do you have any regrets?’ And I’ve always said, ‘No,’ because I’ve really gotten to make everything I wanted to make. But looking back, the thing I regret the most in my career is the crunch modes I participated in and encouraged. When I was younger, we’d just be like, ‘Oh, we’re working day and night and it’s fun because we’re making Monkey Island, or whatever.’ … Monkey Island was fun and we loved working on it, so it didn’t really occur to us to complain or be upset about working day and night. And also, I was young, and I didn’t have much of a life. I’d be like, ‘Okay, I could either work all night or I could go home and watch *Mystery Science Theater* and eat Chinese food.’ It’s not that big a loss, you know? … When it’s just yourself, you can throw yourself against the task as hard as you can. Like, ‘All day and all night, I’m going to push this rock. Ahhh! I’m going to give it my all.’ And then as I got more into a role where I was managing and designing and there were other people doing the gameplay programming stuff, now you’re pushing on a soft person who’s against the rock, so you can squish them and kill them if you push too hard.”



[That team] was like, ‘What? We made all these characters have lightsabers!’ They ended up having billy clubs or something. At the last minute, they had to turn off the lights on the lightsabers. If I licensed Psychonauts to someone else, I’d be the same way. I’d be like, ‘That’s a psychic power, you can’t have magic! The difference between psychic powers and magic is rah rah rah rah.’ I’d be exactly the same way because when you make a world you want it to be consistent.”

In the summer of 2000, Schafer left LucasArts and founded Double Fine Productions (read our feature on the history of Double Fine on Page 44), which has achieved its own measure of fame over the years. Still, many fans look back with reverence at the work Schafer produced during the first decade of his career. Titles like The Secret of Monkey Island, Day of the Tentacle, and Grim Fandango are still considered some of the best adventure games of all time. Even so, Schafer recognizes that the most important thing he developed during his time at LucasArts wasn’t an impressive gameography, it was the formative experiences that shaped him into a designer who could lead a team.

“Something I learned at Lucas was that you don’t really place your bets on ideas, you place your bets on people,” Schafer says. “It’s not the strength of the game idea that makes the game successful, it’s the people who are going to push it, make it work, and change the idea.” ◈

20 YEARS OF

CULT CLASSICS:

THE HISTORY OF DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS

As told by the people who were there

BY BLAKE HESTER

TIM SCHAFER WAS ON A GLACIER SOMEWHERE IN NEPAL, THINKING HE WAS GOING TO DIE, WHEN HE DECIDED TO QUIT HIS JOB AND FOUND HIS OWN COMPANY.

Not too long before, some friends (he doesn't say who) suggested they all leave their positions at LucasArts, the game division of Lucasfilm, to start a new company. But Schafer, who doesn't like "worrying about buying printer paper and toilet paper," says he was hesitant to take them up on the offer.

"I just want to make the games; I don't want to worry about the building and all that stuff," he says, laughing.

Three weeks in Nepal later, after a "grueling journey," as he puts it, Schafer started to change his mind. "Something on that trip, I was like, 'I think when I get back, I'm going to quit and I'm going to start my own company,'" he says. "It was also maybe because I was sick, and I lost 30 pounds on that trip, and I was just marching all day long."

There was also the fear of death, a quick help in the decision-making of any person.

"I thought I was gonna die on this glacier because we took this pass you're not supposed to take in the winter and it was snowing," Schafer recalls. "We're on this glacier that had these sinkholes in it. It was like, 'I guess we're gonna die up here.'

BROKEN AGE

TIM SCHAFER, FOUNDER OF DOUBLE FINE

But we made it. And then I was like, 'Okay, I'm going to start my own company.'"

Whether or not the story is embellished, 20 years later, it's a fitting origin for the company Schafer founded: Double Fine Productions, which has had its fair share of close calls with closure over its two-decade history. But it's also become a mainstay in the game industry, consistently putting out cult classics, such as the original Psychonauts, Brütal Legend, Broken Age, and nearly two dozen other games. While Double Fine has never released a quote-unquote blockbuster – quite the opposite, in a lot of cases – it's made a name for itself creating quirky, inventive, and off-beat titles. And it did all that while remaining independent. That is until 2019, when Microsoft purchased the company.

To tell the storied history of Double Fine, we talked to over a dozen people from the company, including Schafer himself, the people who have been with the studio since its inception, and the newer employees. This is the often-rocky story of Double Fine, as told by those who were there.

Monoxide

In numerous ways, the creation of Psychonauts, the first game Double Fine developed and released, was hazardous to the developers' lives.

Double Fine didn't begin in an office, but rather a garage made into an office in the SoMa district of San Francisco, Calif., in 2000 (after a four-month stint in a "haunted" clog shop). It wasn't great. Rats filled the space. It was below sea level, so when it rained excessively, the sewer would overrun, overflowing the toilets. While working in a garage provided employees with parking, according to people that worked there, it also meant constantly breathing in carbon monoxide.

"You would drive into the office, and like, pull up right next to somebody's desk and turn your car off," says Nathan "Bagel" Stapley, a senior concept artist for Double Fine.

"There was no heat, either," says senior animator Ray Crook. "And so, in the wintertime, we would just hang up big sheets of plastic and had these little space heaters that would blow the circuits if you had more than, like, three of them going."

The neighborhood, at the time, wasn't always safe, either. Writing in a 2015 postmortem for *Gamasutra*, Caroline Esmurdoc, Psychonauts' executive producer, described the office as what "started as punk-rock charm soon became depressing, disgusting, and dangerous."

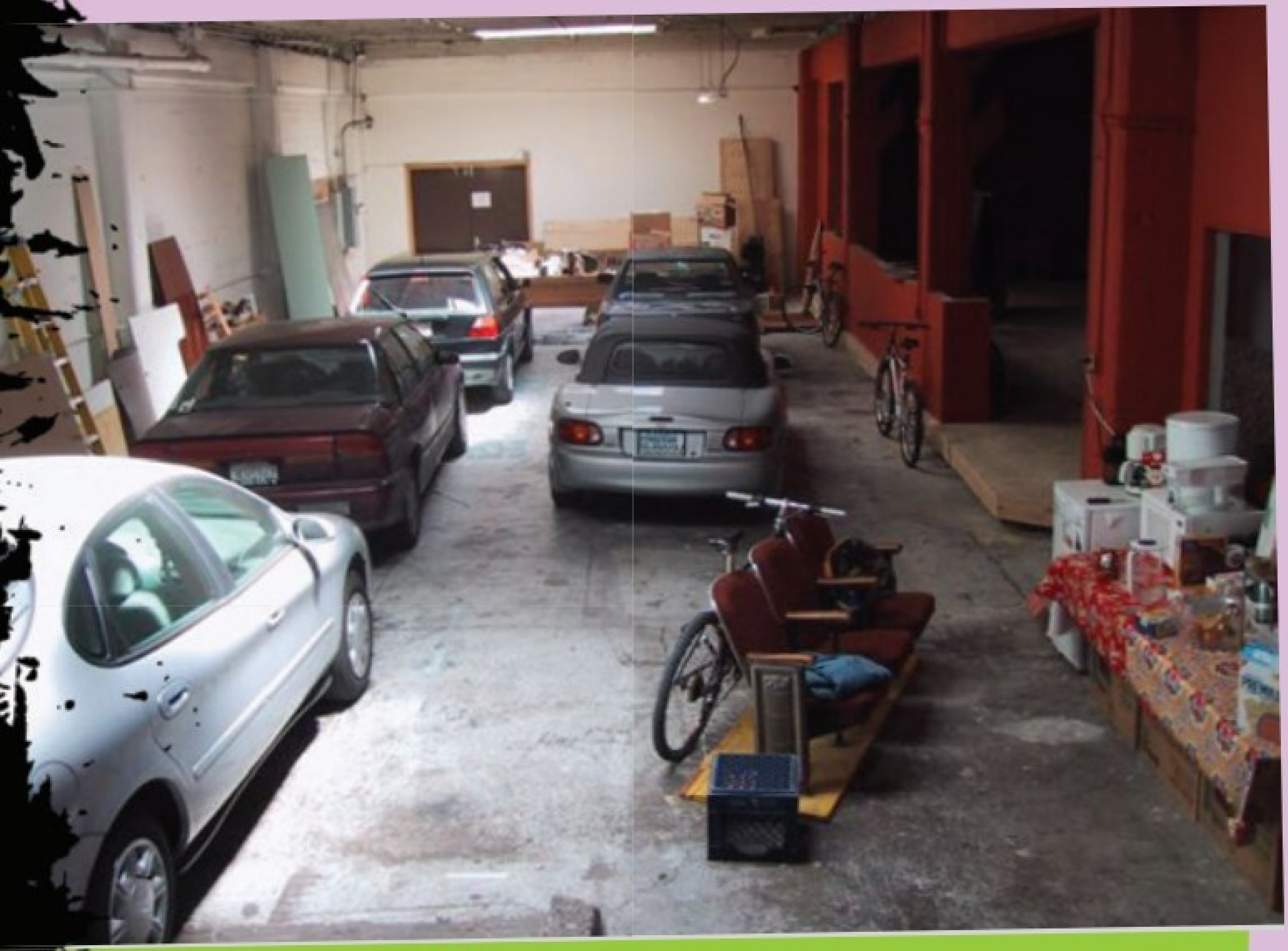
"One night, a woman from the transient hotel next door jumped out a fifth floor window and landed on our roof, breaking her leg and knocking a hole in our ceiling," Esmurdoc wrote. "Another day, there was a dead body in the doorway across the street, apparently the victim of an overdose."

They weren't ideal – or perhaps even always legal – working conditions, but with the bad is also the good. Talking to developers that were there at the time, there's an almost garage-band quality to the early days of Double Fine. They threw parties in the office, decorated the walls with interesting art, and overall enjoyed the company of their coworkers. For a little while, Schafer even made and painted every employee's desk. "That seemed like a cool startup thing to do," he says.

Predictably, the interview process at Double Fine was also atypical. Lead programmer Kee Chi says that when he interviewed with the company, he talked about Zelda for an hour rather than answering any technical programming questions. Instead of going through the process of talking to recruiters and human resources, Levi Ryken, now a senior artist with Double Fine, had to speak to every single person at the company – to get hired as an intern.

"Obviously, these things are all nicer to think about from a distance," Chi says. "And now that we have functioning toilets, we can look at it [like], 'Ah, remember the time when things were like that?' But it's also a time when all of us got to know each other and parts of the game came together. There was a lot of DIY feeling at the old office, that the new offices [don't] quite have.

* To avoid confusion with other articles, all job titles reflect people's current positions on Psychonauts 2



SCOTT CAMPBELL, PSYCHONAUTS ART DIRECTOR

But it also could either be just fond memories of different times or the carbon monoxide poisoning we got at the time. It's one of those things."

Coincidentally, Psychonauts was initially being developed for Microsoft, which was getting ready to release the original Xbox around the same time as Double Fine's founding. While pitching the game, Schafer gave a talk at the annual Game Developers Conference about character design. It caught the ear of Ed Fries, then vice president of game publishing at Microsoft, who signed the game. At the time, Microsoft handed out ping pong balls with the Xbox logo on it, which Fries gave Schafer when they first met. Two decades later, Schafer says he had the ball sitting on his desk when he signed the paperwork for Microsoft's acquisition of Double Fine in 2019. "I had it on a table in a little stand like a little ceremonial thing to bring the whole thing full circle," he says.

Inspired by the team's love of games such as Rayman and Super Mario 64, Psychonauts is a 3D platformer telling the story of Razputin "Raz" Aquato, a 10-year-old psychic in attendance at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp. Raz goes into the minds of various people, confronting their problems and helping them work through their issues. Psychonauts was also made to harken back to the team's memories of summer camp, being kids exploring the woods and stumbling upon unexpected discoveries.

"We had those childhoods," Schafer says. "Back when you're, like, free-range kids, where you'd just wander into really dangerous locations and explore. A lot of those memories got into the first game."

But Psychonauts' development was brutal, and the developers we talked to quickly brought up how hard the company crunched while making the game. There were a few reasons why. For one, Schafer, who wrote and directed the game, had spent the last decade making point-and-click adventure games at LucasArts; he had no experience with 3D platformers. Neither did numerous members of the team. Compounding issues, this was at a time when developers typically made their own engines in-house from scratch. And this was all on top of the fact that Double Fine was a new studio and it had to grow, staff up, and learn how to be a real company. It had to invent all its development pipelines and processes. There was a lot to be done, forcing the team to crunch continuously.

"Back then, you guys were rolling your own engine with a small studio on a new IP with a brand-new team in a f---ing automotive garage," says principal artist Lee Petty. "So yeah, that's gonna be hard."

"All processes that you would think a more mature [studio] would have then, we were just all figuring it out," Chi says. "But I also think this naive optimism that we had in making the

> "YOU WOULD DRIVE INTO THE OFFICE, AND LIKE, PULL UP RIGHT NEXT TO SOMEBODY'S DESK AND TURN YOUR CAR OFF."

PSYCHONAUTS

game also made it so that we could make the crazy game that we did [in] Psychonauts, even though it came with a lot of growing pains [because] we made it in the way that we did."

Psychonauts was in development for around five years. In that time, Double Fine learned how to operate as a team and make the game it wanted to make. But it came with some high costs. There was, of course, the crunch. "It was terrible," Crook says. But also, Microsoft was going through its own internal changes. In January 2004, Fries left the company. Around the same time, Microsoft was beginning its transition to the Xbox 360 in preparation for its November 2005 release. This halted funding for original Xbox games planned to launch after 2004. Expensive and behind schedule, new management within Microsoft opted to cancel Psychonauts – even though, by this point, Double Fine felt it was finally making real progress.

"In February 2004, at what seemed to be our peak productivity, a time when we felt most confident about shipping on schedule, Microsoft decided to discontinue its development of Psychonauts," Esmurdoc wrote in her postmortem. "Microsoft had funded years of mistakes, course corrections, and learning curves, but it drew the line at underwriting the remaining game development now that Double Fine was finally on track. When Ed Fries departed Microsoft, the new management seemed to think that we were expensive and late. The assessment was accurate, though it did not reflect the progress we were finally making toward shipping the game and recovering the development investment."

2004 was a rough year for Double Fine – one it nearly didn't survive. In multiple past interviews, Schafer has even admitted to telling his team Double Fine was shutting down, and that the next paycheck would be the final one. Luckily, however, a loan from SimCity creator Will Wright was able to keep the company afloat before a late-stage deal with Majesco saved both the project and the studio. But despite all the hard work Double Fine put into getting it made, when Psychonauts came out, it was a commercial failure. It got great reviews, but no one was buying it. Psychonauts sold less than 100,000 copies in 2005.

"It was one of those situations where if we'd known, like most games, if you really knew how hard they were going to be by the time they were done, you probably wouldn't have started any of them," Schafer jokes.

But the lessons Double Fine learned on that first game would continue to shape the company for years to come – even if its following projects were far cries from summer camp.

"Is Heavy Metal Worth Risking The Whole Company?"

In preparation for its next project, Double Fine went back to the drawing board. From the ground up, it rethought how it approached development – and crunch.

Double Fine's next game, Brütal Legend, released in October 2009, was incredibly ambitious for its time. Part action-adventure, part real-time strategy game, with multiplayer sprinkled on top, the game tells the story of heavy metal roadie Eddie Riggs, voiced by actor Jack Black, as he tries to save humanity. This time around, EA signed on as publisher, a deal Schafer describes as getting enough money to finish the project correctly while avoiding a big crunch.

"People say, 'Well, that's just an inevitable part of games.' But it's not," Schafer says. "After Psychonauts, we all just got a bunch of books on production methods and [a software development technique called] Scrum. All these things we had never done before. Like, 'How do we plan better? How do we do better software planning?'"

"Even though it was a really long development, like Psychoanuts, I think it was four years or five years," says senior designer Gabe Cinquepalmi. "Definitely much better hours for most people on the second game. Not having done the first one, just hearing the stories."

Brütal Legend received positive reviews, and to this day, is still Double Fine's best-selling game. "But what's a big hit for Double Fine and what's a big hit for EA are different scales," Schafer says. For EA, Brütal was not a financial success, selling just over 200,000 copies in its first month (in a 2011 interview with *Gamasutra*, Schafer said the game had gone on to sell 1.4 million copies over time). Regardless, it didn't stop Double Fine from beginning work on a sequel. But again, EA thought otherwise, canceling Brütal 2, despite the fact Double Fine had invested most of its resources to the project.

"The Brütal [cancellation] was gnarly because we didn't get paid for, like, a month," Stapley says.

"Wasn't that Psychonauts?" Crook asks.

"That was both," producer Malena Annable replies.

Up to this point, Double Fine was a one-game studio, so losing any project was a major blow; the studio's previous games hadn't made enough money that it could afford to coast. When Brütal 2 was canceled, Double Fine was essentially on borrowed time. The studio had to pivot its plans. Fast.

Twice during Brütal's development – once in the middle and once at the end – the team stopped working to participate in what Double Fine calls "Amnesia Fortnight." For two weeks, the studio breaks into smaller teams, tasked with developing a small game under a short time span. It's meant to be a palate cleanser, an internal break that gives the team some time to think about and focus on something other than the game it needs to ship. However, with Brütal 2 canceled and Double Fine at risk of closure again, the projects developed during this two-week game jam became the studio's lifeline.

BRÜTAL LEGEND

Four games – two from the first Amnesia Fortnight, two from the second – were selected to pitch to potential publishers. This included Stacking (THQ), Costume Quest (THQ), Iron Brigade (Microsoft), and Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster (Warner Bros.). Four games, Schafer says, that probably wouldn't have been made if fate hadn't forced the studio's hand. But also, by circumstance, four games that now needed to be made quickly.

"We got back from Thanksgiving break, and Tim's like, 'By the way, they canceled Brütal Legend 2, and we need to get some more money,'" Petty, who directed Stacking, recalls. "So, how would you feel about pitching Stacking starting next week?'"

Effectively, this turned Double Fine into a multi-project studio; it no longer had all its eggs in one basket. It also gave employees at Double Fine other than Schafer the chance to direct their own games, pitch projects to publishers, and lead teams. It's an approach Double Fine has continued, often releasing multiple projects per year.

"It takes away some of that 'betting the farm' feeling that you have when you're a single company making a single game," Schafer says. "It's like, 'Is heavy metal worth risking the whole company?'"

More than 10 years later, smaller projects now make up the bulk of Double Fine's catalog. This move not only saved the company after Brütal 2's cancellation, but it became the studio's primary development and financial model, creating a diverse portfolio full of genres, publishers, and art styles. It wouldn't be the last time Double Fine experimented with how it funded projects.

In 2012, Double Fine launched its first crowdfunding campaign, using the site Kickstarter, asking for $300,000 (the lowest budget the company would have ever worked with) to make a small adventure game and $100,000 to film the process with documentary crew 2 Player Productions. The campaign raised $3,336,371, making it the most-funded Kickstarter campaign up to that point. What began as a small project transformed into a much larger, point-and-click adventure game called Broken Age, a well-reviewed game, but one that took three years to develop and had to be split into two episodes to secure more funding.

The trials, tribulations, and development of Broken Age have been chronicled in exhaustive detail (a product of 2 Player following the entire multi-year process for the *Double Fine Adventure* documentary), but it's still an important piece of Double Fine's history. On the one hand, it proved there is still an audience for the types of games Schafer made at LucasArts. A fact that wasn't lost on Double Fine. After Broken Age, the studio acquired the rights to some of Schafer's old games, such as Grim Fandango and Full Throttle, remastering them for modern consoles. "That helped stabilize the studio financially as well," Petty says.

It also moved Double Fine towards the level of transparency it's now known for. Including Broken Age, 2 Player has also documented numerous Amnesia Fortnights, the development of the aforementioned remasters, and produced a retrospective on the original Psychonauts. The crew's still at Double Fine, too, filming the development of Psychonauts 2. Everything at the studio is for show. Inadvertently, it's created a unique situation, where potential employees can learn about Double Fine to a degree most people can't about possible future jobs.

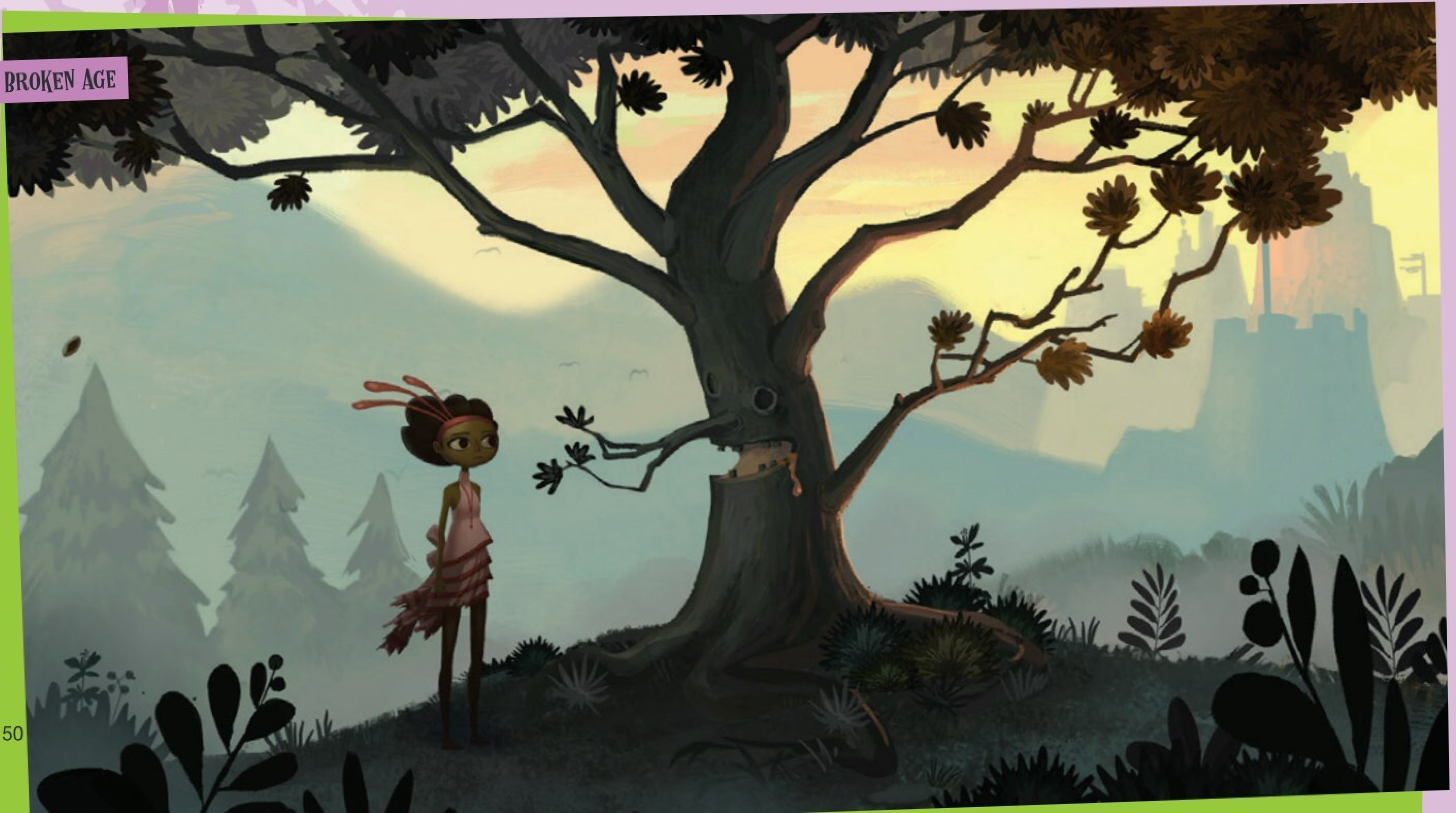
"It was a great way to see what type of people worked at Double Fine and Double Fine's philosophies," senior systems programmer Aaron Jacobs says. "Having watched that, it made it very clear that it would be a great place to work. It just seemed like a really enjoyable place to be. And so yeah, when I then graduated college, it was just like, a no-brainer. It made sense to come to join this place that just seemed like a fantastic place to work at."

While it is hard to have cameras constantly in the studio, most staff we talked to say the *Double Fine Adventure* documentary is like a yearbook or journal for Broken Age, allowing team members to relive the experience on YouTube at any time. That said, Double Fine offers all employees the option to opt-out of being featured in its documentaries.

"I've had a lot of team members being like, 'I never wanna be that exposed again,'" Schafer admits about *Double Fine Adventure*. "I had some people be like, some programmers, 'I just wanna work on tools from now on. I don't wanna face the public anymore.' Because it's raw and it takes a toll."

The development of Broken Age stands as an inflection point for Double Fine. It provided the studio with a level of autonomy over what projects it works on, bypassing the traditional publisher model, going directly to fans. It wouldn't be the only project Double Fine crowdfunded. All of this would combine for Double Fine's newest, and biggest, project yet: Psychonauts 2.

BROKEN AGE



DOUBLE FINE SUMMER PICNIC, 2019

"I THINK PRIORITIZING PEOPLE IS SOMETHING THAT DOUBLE FINE DOES A GOOD JOB AT."

Still Here After All These Years

In 2021, Double Fine is a known quantity. While it still hasn't released a blockbuster per se, the developer has been a consistent source of interesting and unique games throughout its two decades. Now 20 years after its first employees breathed in carbon monoxide in a parking garage with no heat, its catalog is full of cult classics and fan favorites. Double Fine has a better, safer office, too.

It's also a great time of change for Double Fine. In 2015, the studio announced Psychonauts 2. Again, it turned to fans, this time through the crowdfunding/investment site Fig, founded by Double Fine's former COO, Justin Bailey. Schafer also serves as an advisor for the company. By the end of the campaign in January 2016, Double Fine raised over $3.8 million for development. While it's also released numerous other games since, such as Headlander, Grim Fandango Remastered, and Rad, and dipped its toe into publishing, Psychonauts 2 is Double Fine's largest project.

Perhaps too big – at least for crowdfunding. While it's allowed the game to exist in a way that it might not have otherwise, Schafer admits that Psychonauts 2, now a five-plus year project, is too much for the model. "One year," he says. "One year's the max." In 2017, Starbreeze also invested $8 million into the project's development, acquiring rights to release the game digitally on consoles and PC – though that's since been assigned to Microsoft.

This leads in many ways to Double Fine's most recent and most significant change: It's no longer an independent studio. In 2019, onstage at E3, Schafer revealed that Microsoft had purchased Double Fine. In the immediate term, this move helps the production of Psychonauts 2; Schafer told *GamesIndustry.biz* in 2020 that before the purchase, Double Fine had removed the game's boss fights for budget reasons but was able to add them back in once Microsoft got involved.

In the long term, it means Double Fine no longer must tour around pitching its games, looking for funding from different partners, trying to strike deals to stay alive. Being under the Microsoft umbrella is a security blanket for Double Fine – even if there are still unknowns and anxieties from people at the studio.

"For me, it was just, I was scared but I was also relieved," Crook says. "I had both those things. Because we'd been through so much, and so much of it was financial. And then I was thinking about the burden that it would take off of Tim, and that felt good to me, knowing what he's gone through and what a lot of us have gone through. But then there's always – you're scared, right? Is this going to change everything? Is Double Fine, what it is, just going to be no more? Is it going to be different?"

"I was very much like, 'I don't want to be acquired,'" Schafer says. "But when they started talking about what they had learned from acquiring Minecraft [developer] Mojang [...] how to honor what makes a company successful as you acquire it, I felt like that was really true, that they had figured out a different model for acquisition that is non-destructive."

Comparing the production of Psychonauts to its sequel reveals apparent growth for Double Fine. For one, talking to newer members of the team, crunch and labor expectations are far better than they were on the first game. While it's not perfect, there's always room for improvement; according to the people we talked to, Double Fine makes a concerted effort to keep hours realistic and manageable. The same can be said about amplifying the creativity of its employees. Just because someone works in one department doesn't mean they can't contribute ideas to another.

"I think prioritizing people is something that Double Fine does a good job at," says environment artist Janice Bell. "Because it just feels like a lot of other studios see their people as assets, where Double Fine is the first studio I've worked at where they actually see you as people, important parts of the studio with views that matter and input that matter[s]."

Where Double Fine goes next remains to be seen. It's an interesting time for the company, though, as it might be one of the only times in 20 years that it's had some amount of solid financial security. Through ups and downs, near misses, and close calls, Double Fine has made it through a lot of tumultuous times, and somehow never abandoned what made the company special in the first place. It might not be the last time Double Fine falls on hard times, but at the very least, it has stability now.

"I joked that Double Fine was really – the one thing that we truly excelled at was circling the drain," Annable says about Double Fine's future with Microsoft. "So, if this put a few more inches in the tub, it was perfect for me."

PSYCHONAUTS 2

The Many Games Of
DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS

by Blake Hester

In its 20 years, Double Fine has released a lot of games – all of them unique and interesting in their own ways. So, we asked people at the studio what game in Double Fine's portfolio means the most and why. In doing so, we've compiled a list of Double Fine's greatest hits, games that are significant to not only the company itself, but the people who made them.

Psychonauts

Release: 2005

Concept: Double Fine's first game, it tells the story of Raz, a psychic in attendance at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp as he infiltrates people's minds and attempts to help them solve their problems.

Why it's special: For a young team, we were allowed a lot of creative ownership and input into the final product and we all had a voice under the creative leadership of Tim [Schafer], Erik Robson, and Scott Campbell, and I think it really does come across in the game. This also meant that we were all driven for the overall holistic quality of the game instead of thinking only about our own corner of development. *– Kee Chi, lead programmer*

Brütal Legend

Release: 2009

Concept: Heavy metal roadie Eddie Riggs (voiced by Jack Black) goes to another dimension to save humanity.

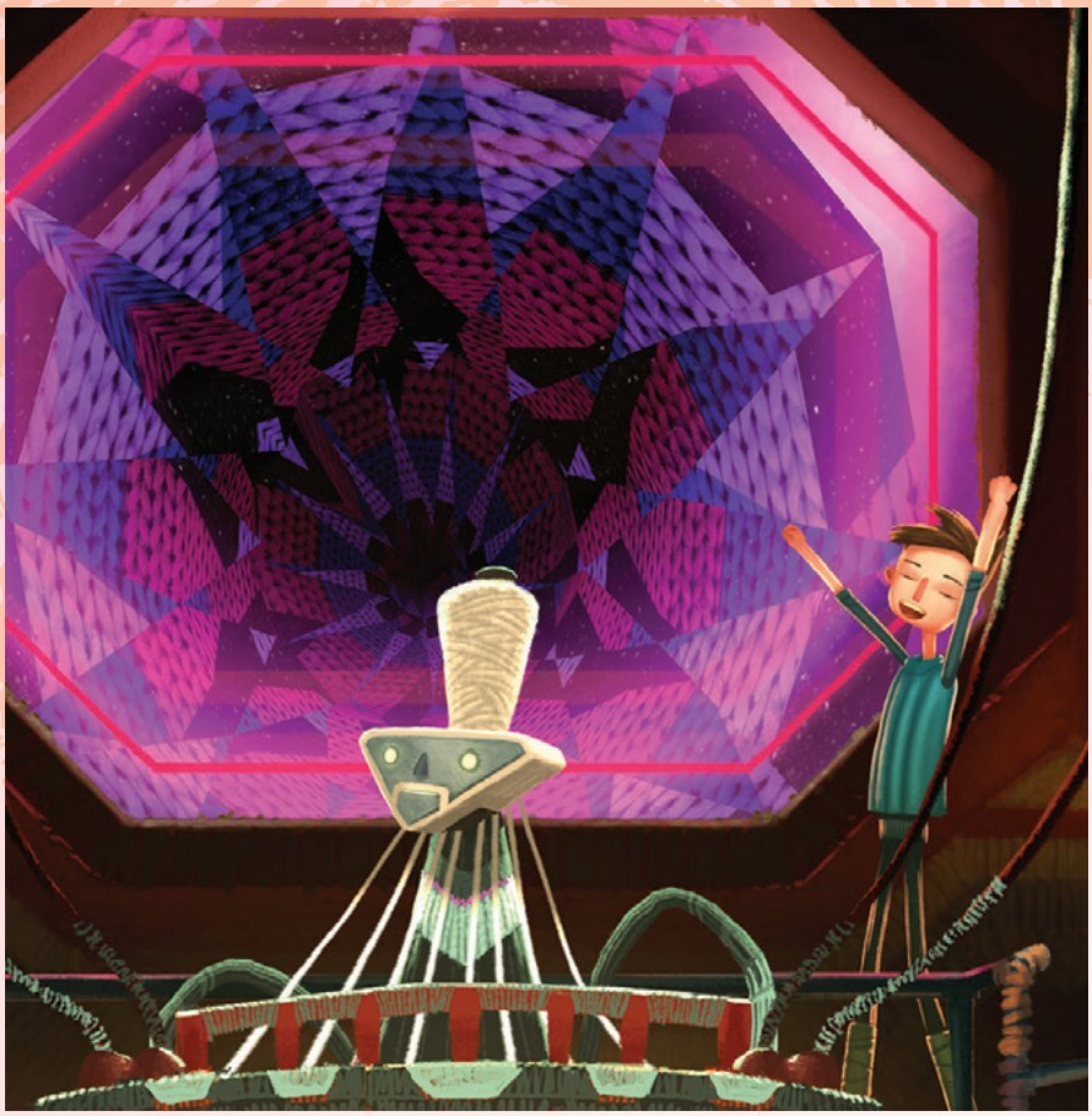
Why it's special: For Double Fine, I think Brütal Legend holds a special place. The experience with publishers, the size of the game, and the cancellation of Brütal Legend 2 really played a monumental role in what became the more nimble and varied Double Fine of today where we had several titles being worked on simultaneously (see page 49). *– Paul O'Rourke, senior sound designer*

Iron Brigade

Release: 2011

Concept: Set after World War I in an alternate history, pilot mechs as you take on increasing waves of foes.

Why it's special: Iron Brigade was such a strange and unique time at [Double Fine]. It was the fourth project to be greenlit from one of our earliest Amnesia Fortnights. The whole team was green in terms of running a project; there were 11 of us and we were all leads of multiple aspects of the game. The studio wanted to accomplish staying alive at that time. My personal goal was to transition into an art director; I did a lot of that work and accomplishing that helped me grow tremendously. Most people who work on games don't get to see all the sausage get made, but with a team this small, we were all doing things that you don't normally interface with (budget, managing hours, etc.). *– Geoffrey Soulis, principal artist & lead environment artist*



BROKEN AGE

Release: 2014

Concept: Tim Schafer's return to point-and-click adventure games, Broken Age centers on Vella and Shay as they try and break free from the monotony of their day-to-day. It was the first game Double Fine developed through crowdfunding, raising more than $3 million via Kickstarter, and the start of the company's in-depth development documentaries.

Why it's special: We had never used Kickstarter – so we were learning what did and didn't work. There was a documentary of the game being filmed while we were making it – we were learning what did and didn't work for that. It was a completely new idea so concept, design, programming, art, audio … we started from scratch. But it grew organically. And the journey was documented. I think we made an amazing game.
– Camden Stoddard, audio director

GRIM FANDANGO REMASTERED

Release: 2015

Concept: A remaster of LucasArts' classic point-and-click adventure game, originally directed by Tim Schafer in 1998. The remaster made the game easy to play for the modern age and helped lead to Double Fine's other LucasArts remasters of Day of the Tentacle and Full Throttle.

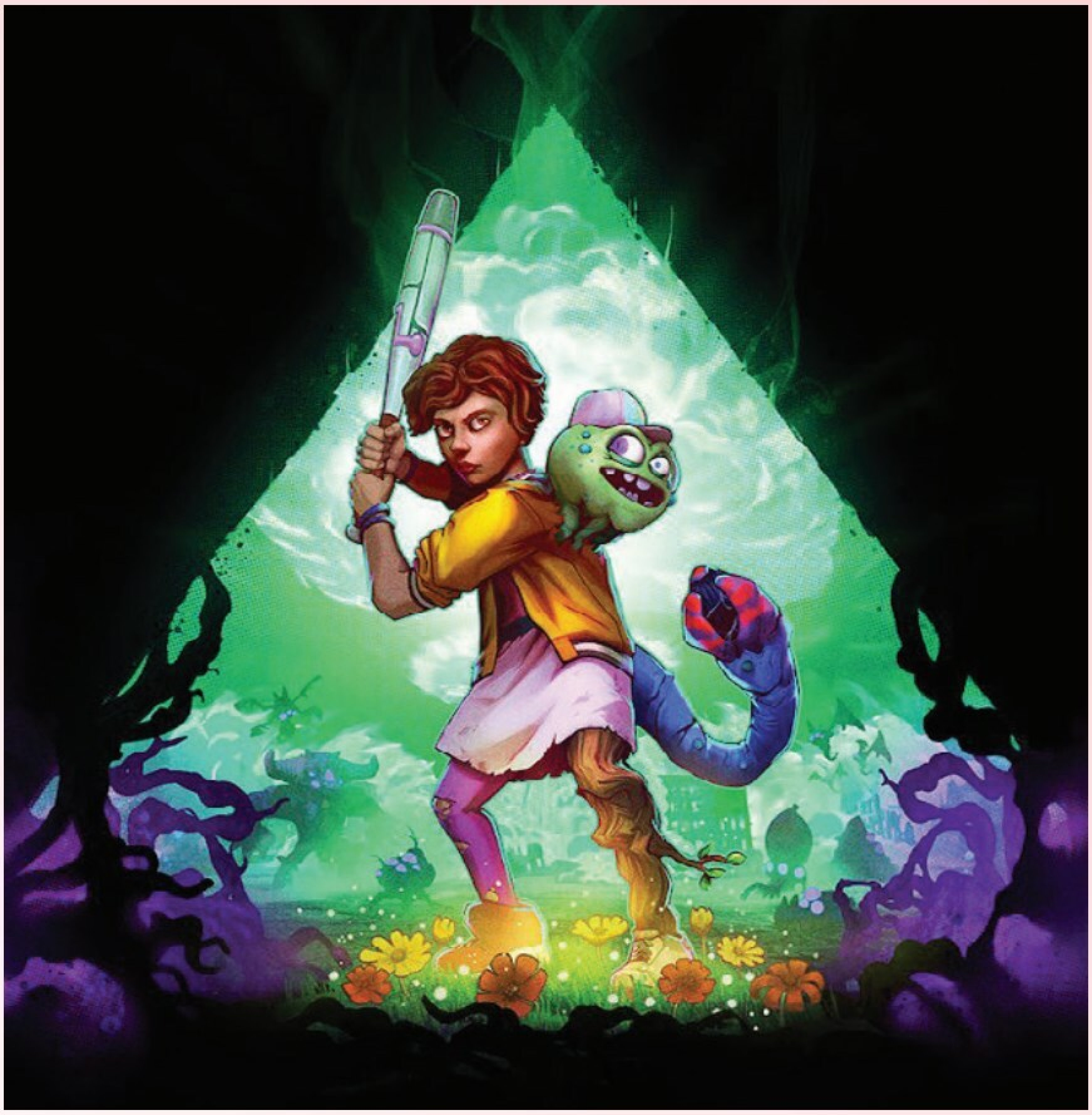
Why it's special: Grim Fandango Remastered was Double Fine's promise to preserve the history of not just video games important to us, but to the game industry and to the players who love these titles and find it increasingly difficult to play them on new hardware. It isn't always an easy proposition to bring old games into the present, but it is a worthy endeavor and I'm proud that we had the opportunity to do this for three of the seminal works from Tim and LucasArts' history.
– Victor Romero, release manager

RAD

Release: 2019

Concept: Roam a procedurally generated wasteland trying to find effigies called Respirators, all in hopes of restoring humanity after the post-post-apocalypse.

Why it's special: The studio's goal was just to get another game signed so we could keep chuggin'. Our goal was to make a game we wanted to play, and we were all playing roguelikes at the time. My personal goal was to broaden my chops further with pure gameplay design rather than relying on story to do a lot of the heavy lifting.
– Gabe Cinquepalmi, senior designer



Psychonauts 2

Release: 2021

Concept: A rare Double Fine sequel, Psychonauts 2 picks up the series' story within days of the first game. Play as Raz once more as he enters people's minds and tries to carve his own path as a member of the Psychonauts.

Why it's special: Psychonauts 2 has changed Double Fine considerably, but speaking as a designer, one of the most notable changes is that Double Fine now has "designers" on staff, whereas in the past, design was something that was a shared job done by everyone. Figuring out the role of a "designer" at Double Fine, how we can integrate into the studio without disrupting the magic and earning the trust of folks who are used to working without dedicated designers, that's all over Psychonauts 2, though maybe not something easily pointed to on the screen.
– Ben Johnson, senior game designer

Hot Wheels Unleashed

Pedal to the Mattel

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Racing
(12-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Milestone

» **Developer**
Milestone

» **Release**
September 30

Ever since Hot Wheels made its debut in the 1960s, the toy vehicles have been integral to the lives of millions of people. Now, many who grew up playing with the beloved die-cast cars may not have the time or space to continue collecting them, but the memories persist. The racing veterans over at Milestone, the development studio behind series like Ride, MotoGP, and Monster Energy Supercross, share that same love and are collaborating with toymaker Mattel on a new game that leverages both the studio's experience and the toys' long history.

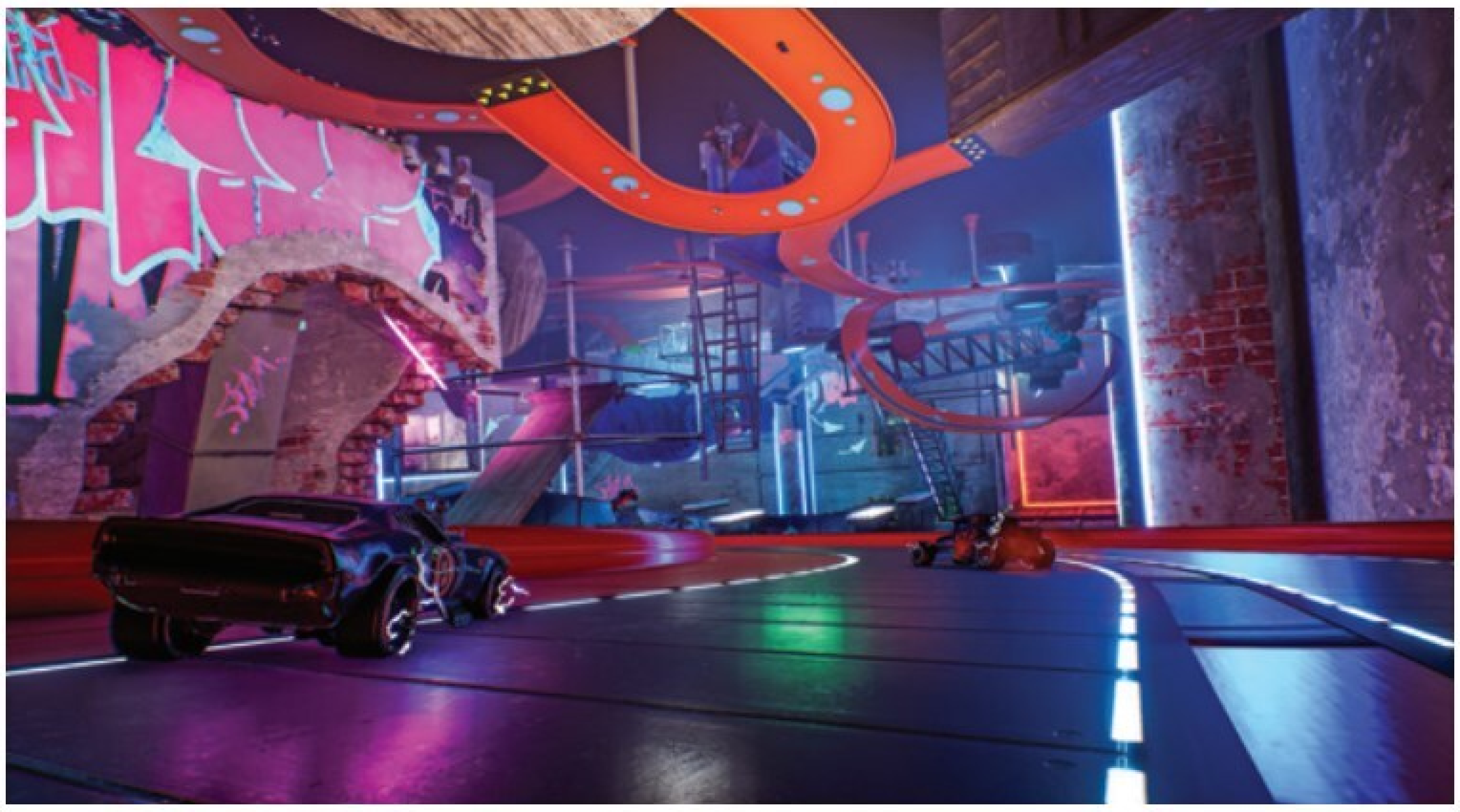
As a studio accustomed to collaborating with established brands, Milestone approached Mattel about working on a Hot Wheels game three years ago, but didn't receive the greenlight because of timeline issues. However, that soon changed.

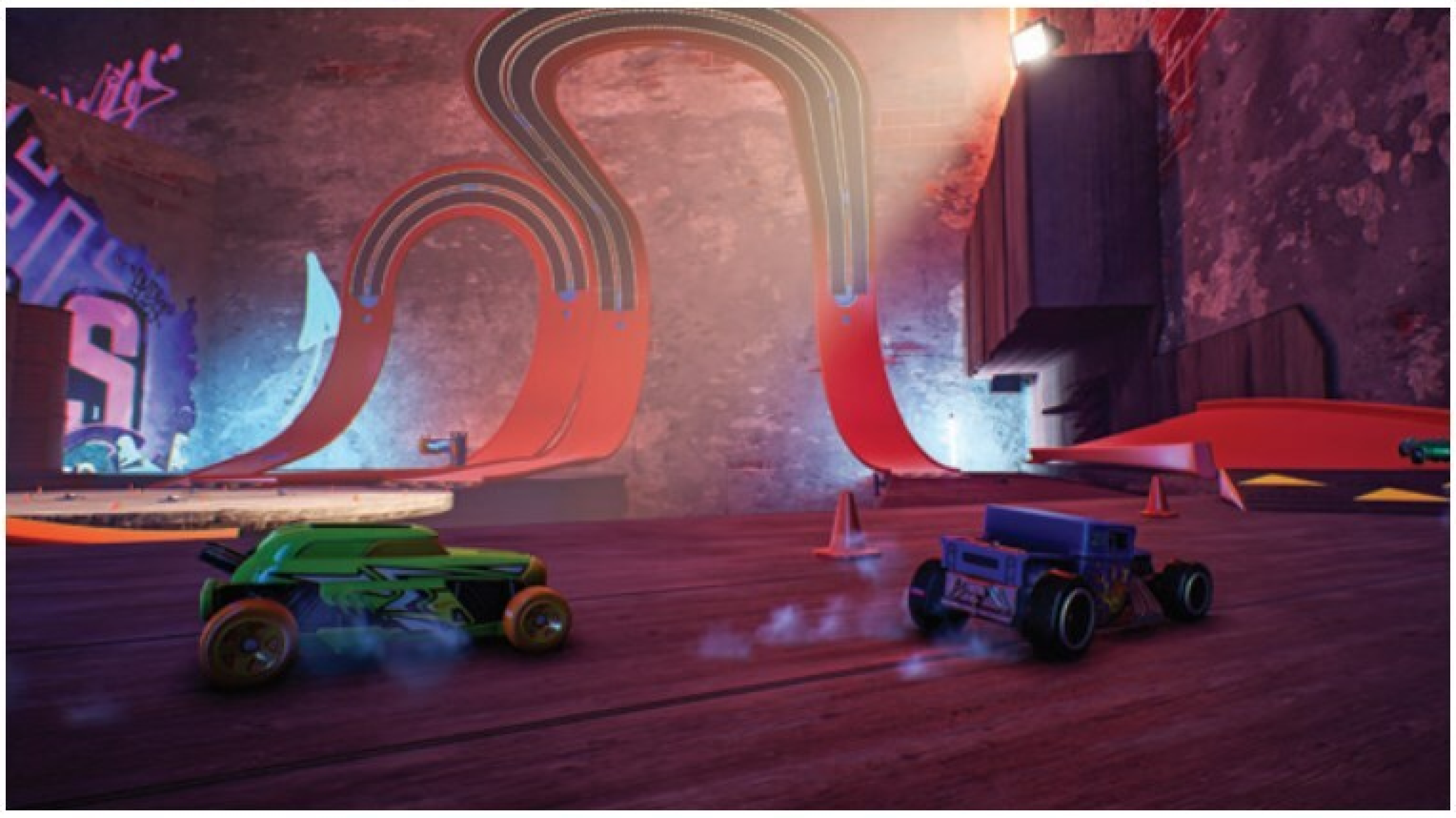
"We were like, 'Oh well, it was nice, but I don't think they're interested; they say they're busy,'" says lead game designer Federico Cardini. "Then something like six or eight months later, they were like, 'Okay guys, now we're ready to talk about this project. What do you want to do?' We were like, 'Oh my God, it's really happening!' We started discussing it with them; we gave them a series of ideas and we tried to find a middle ground between their future projects and ours. And then Hot Wheels Unleashed was born! We were really happy when we heard back from them."

Luckily for Milestone, Mattel already had a division that handles video games, so the team could hit the ground running. Mattel was well aware of the gaming market and industry, giving the relationship a strong starting point.

With the partnership established and the project racing forward, Milestone began crafting an experience it hoped could replicate the feeling the team members have from playing with Hot Wheels growing up. "We wanted kind of this realistic approach, which is something that fits well with Milestone because we're used to recreating real competitions," Cardini says. "Then we wanted to give that a little bit of a spin that only we can give and combine it with the imagination of the toys."

Based on my limited hands-on time, the result is an experience veering closer to an arcade racer than simulation, but the studio's history is evident in how well the cars handle. As you ride along the iconic orange tracks sprawled across everyday areas like the garage, you can speed into corners and boost through straightaways. The final game will feature six environments, including one that lets you race through various rooms on a single track. If you want to go off track, different surfaces feel distinct, and players can even freely roam and interact with objects in the environment.





While I could only play through a small selection of tracks in Quick Race mode, Hot Wheels Unleashed also offers time attack, split-screen multiplayer, online multiplayer, and career mode. While Milestone can't say much about any of those modes yet, career is the best way to experience the widest variety of content and earn in-game rewards. The game will ship with 40 tracks, featuring more than 20 unique pieces to create the courses, but perhaps the main attraction of the package is the track editor.

The track editor gives you access to the same tools as Milestone to create your own courses. Not only that, but you can use those tracks in nearly all modes. "Excluding the career mode, where you will see a selection of tracks made by us, everything we have in the game also supports tracks made by the players," Cardini says. "All the tracks that we've given you so far have been made with the track editor with no tricks."

The tracks I experienced have everything from a stationary dragon to courses that allow players to literally drive up walls. "It can be gravity-defying," Cardini says. "Even borderline broken, in a good sense because we are not putting any restrictions on how the track editor is used because we wanted to have an approach very similar to how you actually play with the orange track piece in the real world."

Milestone has plenty of love for the Hot Wheels brand, and it shows. Not only are the tracks inventive and clearly tributes to the Hot Wheels tracks of our dreams, but with more than 60 iconic vehicles and an ambitious post-launch content plan, players can expect a long lifecycle after the title hits storefronts.

While what I played didn't include the full suite of features – I can't wait to learn more about the track editor – the racing mechanics are smooth, and the cars feel great when taking a corner. With a garage full of iconic cars and that distinct Hot Wheels look to both the vehicles and tracks, I'm looking forward to a drive down memory lane when the game launches this September. » **Brian Shea**

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

The power of PlayStation 5

» Platform
PS5

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Insomniac Games

» Release
June 11

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart is exactly what it needs to be: a direct continuation of the beloved series doubling as a showpiece of new-generation technology. I recently saw an hour of Rift Apart in action, and almost every second of play screams of nostalgia while also dazzling with a scale and speed that hasn't been attainable until PlayStation 5.

In the decades we've spent journeying with Ratchet and Clank, we've watched them battle against alien armadas and save the universe time and time again. Their efforts have not gone unnoticed. One thankful civilization on a distant world is finally honoring our brave heroes with an extravagant parade. In the opening shot, we see Ratchet and Clank emerge to a sea of roaring fans seated in airborne bleachers that overlook massive balloon representations of the heroes. This single moment has so much to see, including a detailed alien cityscape on the ground far beneath the festive parade. For the opening shot, developer Insomniac Games leans into the power of PlayStation 5 to drop jaws and establish the scale players can expect as this adventure unfolds.

Ratchet and Clank are introduced as the parade's grand marshals by none other than Captain Qwark, the megalomaniac who always seems to find a camera and microphone to sing of his own praises. In this particular moment, Qwark is narrating one of Ratchet and Clank's adventures, which the player gets to play through on a movie-like set of an alien world. This begins the tutorial, bringing the classic Ratchet and Clank gameplay roaring back into view. We also hear the soundtrack intensify; heroic melodies from composer Mark Mothersbaugh draw loose inspiration from his work on the motion picture *Thor: Ragnarok*. Insomniac Games targeted this film as the type of soundtrack it wanted, and as luck would have it, they were able to hire the man behind it.

When Ratchet's wrench slams into a stack of boxes, the thundering score gives way to the familiar clanging of bolts, movements from the character, and assistance of the friend strapped to his back. Although Ratchet is just demonstrating the moves he used in battle to the crowd, something is amiss. He's not just taking on cardboard standees. The Blarg are here, and more are arriving in dropships. This isn't part of the parade.

A huge battle unfolds, sending the duo hurtling across different floats and even within the skyscrapers of the city itself. Ratchet rail grinds, flips through the air, and unloads hell from a firearm called the Burst Pistol. Creative weapon designs have always been one of the key pillars of this game series, and that remains the case in Rift Apart. The one big difference now is that they will all feel significantly better, thanks to the DualSense controller's unique functionality.

Most weapons take advantage of the controller's adaptive triggers. With the Burst Pistol, the player can easily tap into two different firing modes. Pulling in the right trigger slightly unloads slow but accurate fire. Pulling the trigger full-bore creates a faster chamber rotation, but reduces accuracy. The next gun we see is the Enforcer, which appears to be Rift Apart's equivalent of the shotgun. The lighter pull fires one barrel and the click-through fires both of them. A nice touch on this gun is two lights on its stock, which turn green when it's ready to fire and red when it's not.

While these two guns are similar in usage, the Negaton Collider shows off the DualSense's unique features when used for a charged weapon. To generate a shot, the player pulls the trigger until they feel resistance, then, when ready, pulling through will fire the beam. This method delivers the tactical choice to instantly fire with a little more effort or outright cancel the beam by pulling the finger off of the trigger.

I saw six weapons in play. Along with the three aforementioned, Ratchet can equip a Shatterbomb Glove to, well, throw bombs; the Ricochet Gun that works as you would expect, and last and certainly not least, is an armament with the strange name of the Topiary Sprinkler. When this weapon connects with an enemy, a plant instantly sprouts and climbs up their body, rendering them immobile for a few seconds, and making them look like a topiary in front of a mansion.

I even see how this weapon works on a lumbering robot boss named "Wee" Roger. Once he's defeated, a more powerful version of him appears with the upgraded name of "Not-So-Wee" Roger. The bosses have health meters that are easy to read. Fans of the series will also see an ammo bar has been added to just above every weapon, allowing you to keep better tabs on your arsenal. New depth of field has also been added to better frame the target you have in your sights.

The attack on the parade comes from long-time series villain Dr. Nefarious, who is here to steal the Dimensionator that Clank was planning to gift to Ratchet. Clank fixed this dangerous device so Ratchet could finally visit the dimension where all of his Lombax species reside; Ratchet is the only one in this dimension. Dr. Nefarious, who is continually suffering defeat, wants to use the Dimensionator to reach a dimension where he always wins. The raytracing effects on the Doctor's helmet look fantastic, a small but noticeable touch.

The chase to secure this universe-changing tool brings an epic war to this peaceful planet. The parade's floats and balloons are torn asunder, sometimes with Ratchet and Clank on them, creating unstable footing with the platform rocking back and forth, making firing straight tricky.

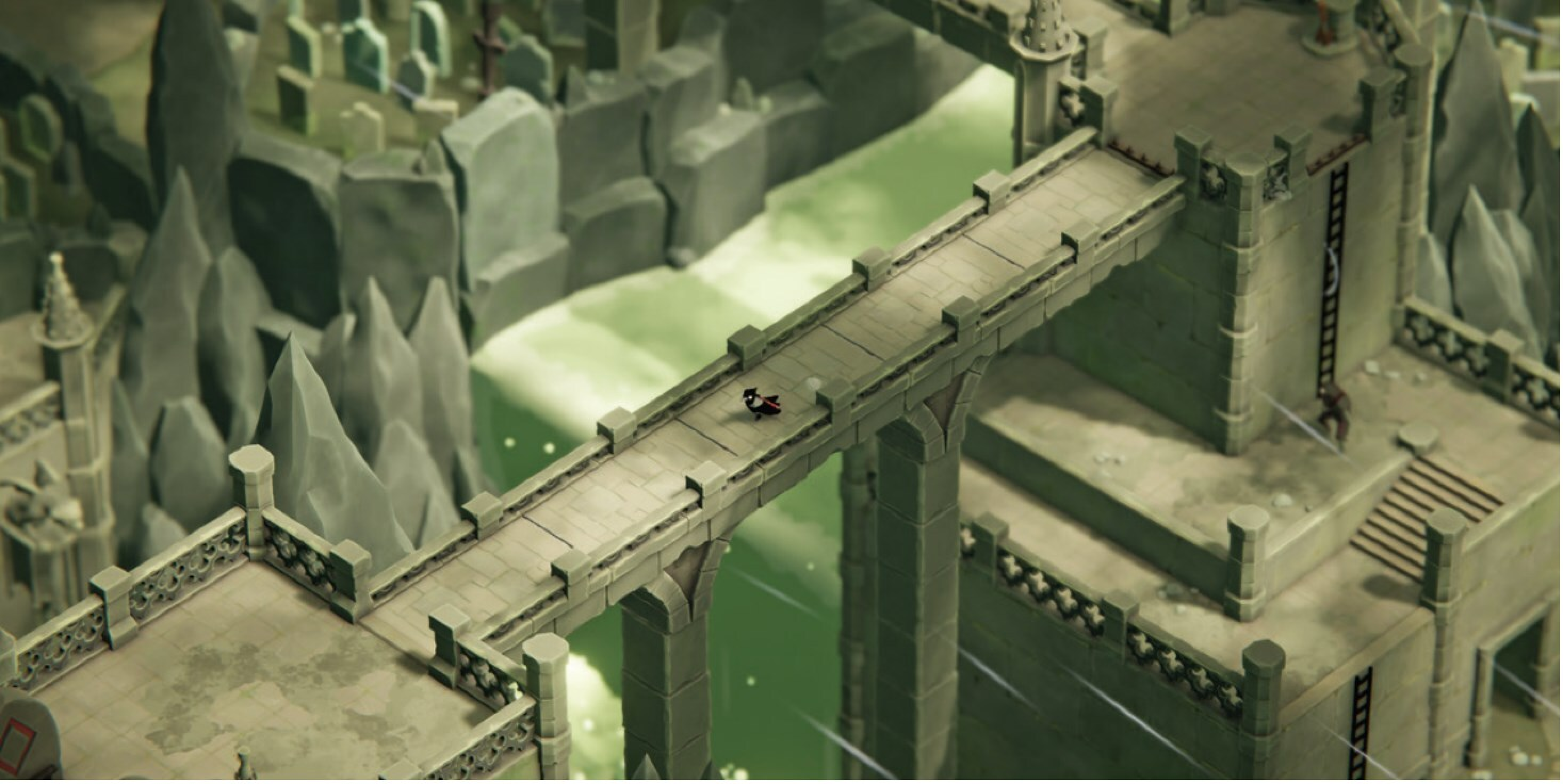
I didn't get to see what happens at the end of this stage, and was instead whisked away to a level much later in the game. This stage is seen through the eyes of Rivet, a new playable character, who is also a Lombax. Her dimension is at war, and she is part of the resistance. She has a purplish/pinkish fur and one of her arms is mechanical. Instead of wielding a wrench, she proudly swings a hammer.

We meet Rivet on a dusty, industrial planet that looks like it has poor air quality. Here, she bounds up cliffs, battling robotic pirate forces, and eventually squares off against a Godzilla-sized robot, which actually becomes intertwined with the platforming. She dashes across falling structures, onto the robot's shoulders, and then onto a dangerous rail sequence that has cranes hastily laying tracks in front of her.

Rivet's move set is exactly like Ratchet's. She can strafe (which can now be set to auto, so you don't have to hold down the trigger), acrobatically flip through the air, and also use the series' classic Hover Boots to gain incredible speed. Ratchet and Rivet can both perform a new move called the Phantom Dash, which phases them in and out of reality, granting them partial invincibility. This supposedly adds dimensions to combat and traversal, as it can be executed from any move. Although Rivet has been alone her entire life, she'll eventually have Clank at her side.

We don't yet know if the player will get the chance to choose whether they want to play as Ratchet or Rivet, but the story determines who you play as at any given time. Clank once again gets in on this action through a new platforming minigame that has the player trying to draw power from one dimension to the next. These puzzles push the player to bounce across platforms and avoid obstacles to create a through-line for the power.

Insomniac has been on a roll with the Spider-Man games, and Rift Apart looks every bit as epic and fun. It's one of the few early PlayStation 5 exclusives, and it looks like the team is taking this new hardware for a serious ride. » **Andrew Reiner**



Death's Door

Don't fear the reaper

» Platform
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Devolver Digital

» Developer
Acid Nerve

» Release
Summer

Death's Door is developer Acid Nerve's long-awaited follow-up to 2015's Titan Souls. Whereas Titan Souls was a Shadow of the Colossus-inspired gauntlet of boss battles with Zelda-like trappings, Death's Door leans more heavily into the adventuring aspect with a fully fleshed out dark fantasy world filled with dungeons, bosses, and a deeper narrative.

In Death's Door, death is a day-to-day operation overseen by an organization of crows. You control one such crow, an inexperienced reaper who, while on assignment to collect a particular soul, discovers a strange realm where nothing has died for centuries. How can death have no sway here? That's for you to find out.

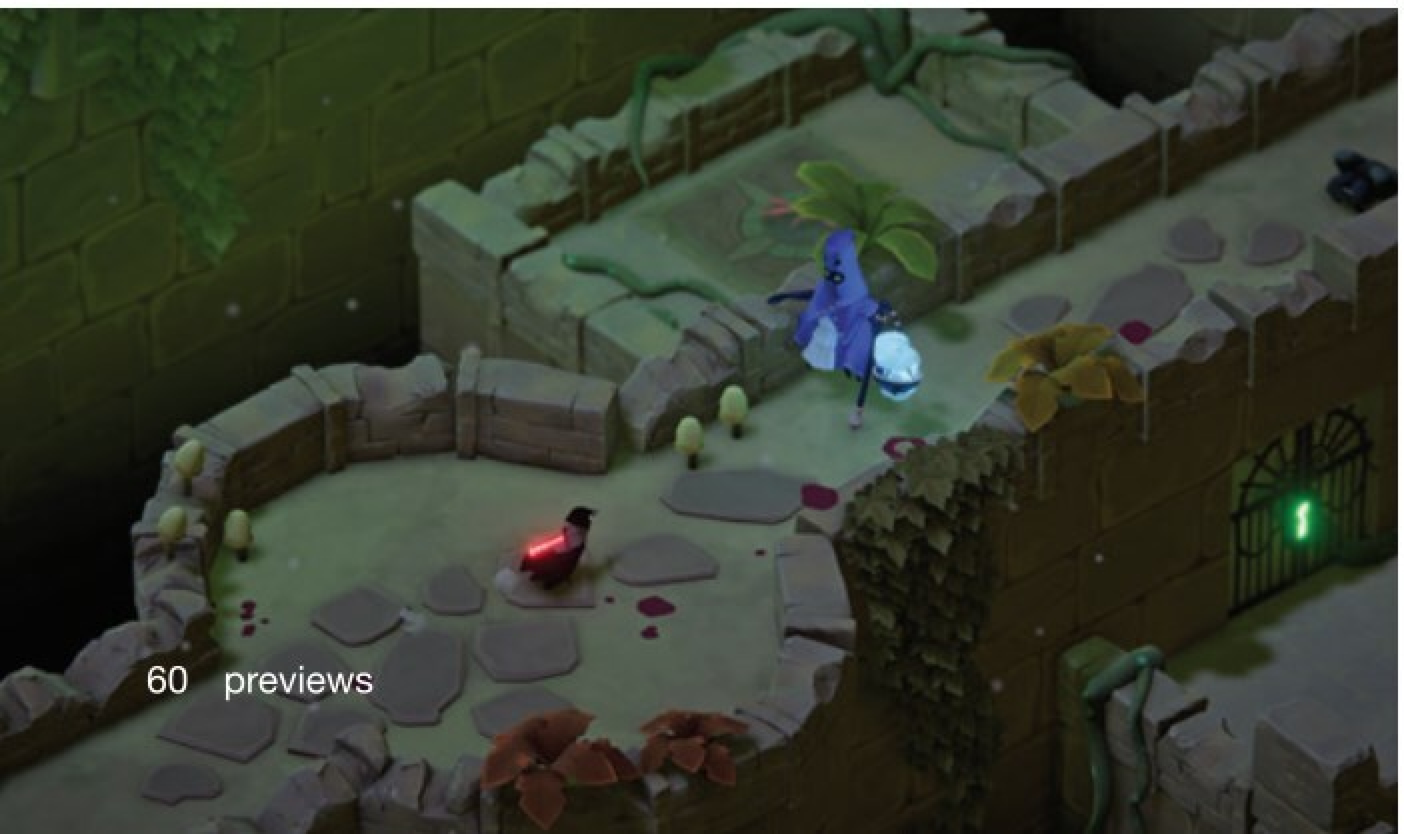
So why crows? Studio heads David Fenn and Mark Foster say the character began as a stand-in while designing the prototype that wound up fitting the game's grim-yet-humorous tone. "They're kind of dark," says Fenn. "They're associated with death, but they are just also funny little animals. So, it kind of melded the vibe that we're going for."

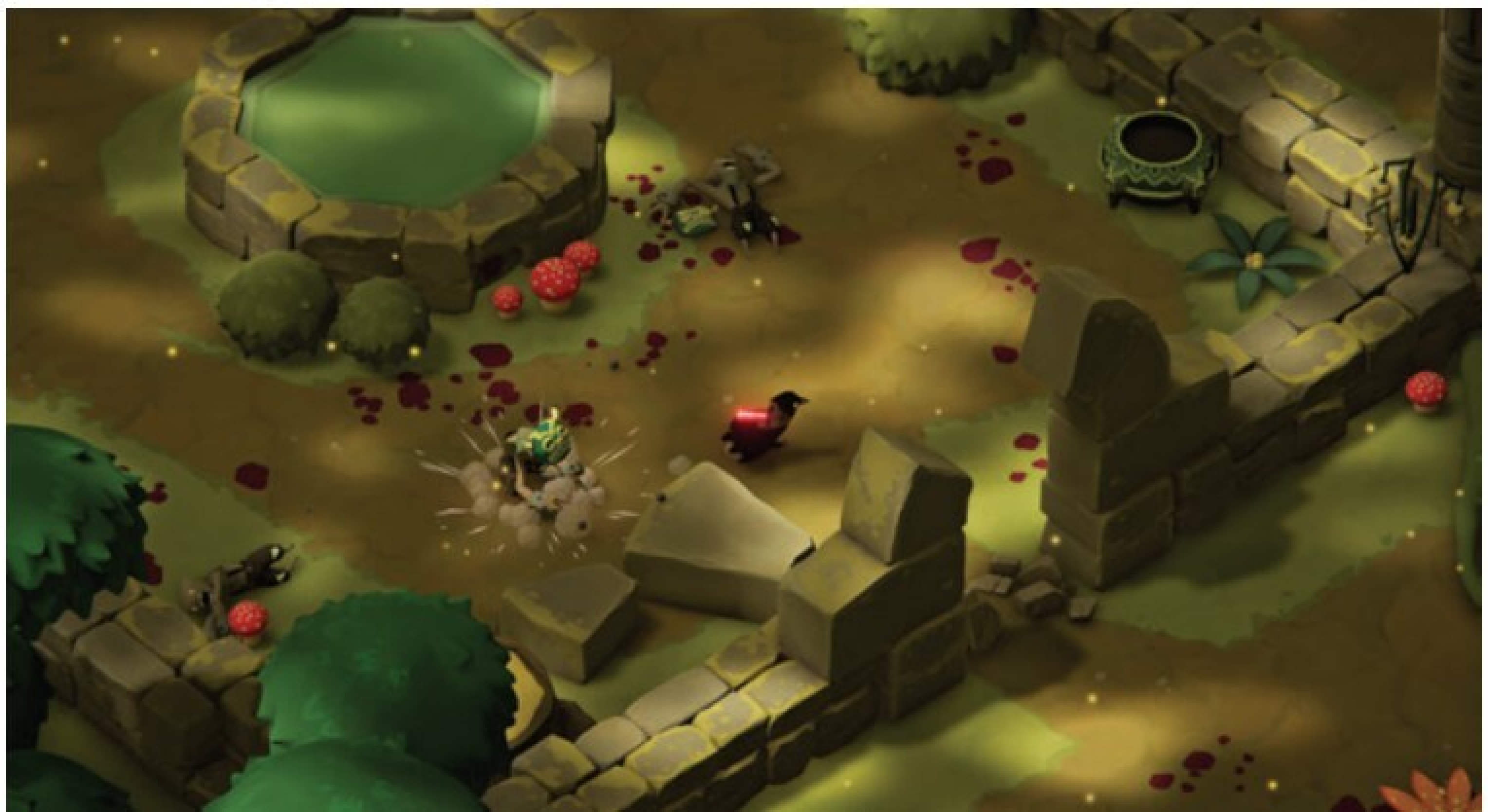
Combat in Death's Door consists of classic hack-and-slash gameplay. The crow primarily uses a sword, but players will acquire other weapons (like a bow and arrow) as well as magic spells. Weapons and magic can be upgraded, and players can allocate skill points towards specific abilities to mold a version of the crow that better fits their playstyle. That said, Fenn says combat forces players to engage with all mechanics, so you'd best get comfortable with everything in your arsenal.

No matter what offensive skills you prefer, you'll use them to take down legions of monstrous, otherworldly foes. Building off Acid Nerve's work on Titan Souls, expect plenty of large-scale boss battles in Death's Door. The game's debut trailer features the crow battling a sentient, laser-shooting cathedral and a frog-knight that bounces on his mace like a pogo stick.

In terms of exploration, the crows' headquarters serves as the hub world players regularly revisit. Given that it's basically the epicenter of death itself, this area appears in a gloomy noir-esque grayscale while the rest of the world is presented in full color. Acid Nerve says the Zelda series serves as the game's primary inspiration and describes exploration as largely open with an overworld littered with dungeons. At the same time, certain areas are inaccessible until you acquire a specific tool or ability. Side activities exist, but Fenn describes them as being less fetch quest-style padding and more hand-crafted and purposeful.

Death's Door has a cool premise that Fenn says he and Foster have been kicking around for years. It's their biggest project to date, so it's great to see it coming together as nicely as it appears to be. The combat looks fluid and satisfying, and who doesn't want to play as a cute, sword-wielding crow? We can't wait to see more of Death's Door in action when it arrives on Xbox consoles and PC this summer.
» Marcus Stewart





Icarus

Session-based survival

Survival games continue to capture the attention of the gaming world as publishers and developers attempt new spins on the classic core. Dean Hall of DayZ fame is back with RocketWerkz to add an interesting new foible to the survival mix with the free-to-play Icarus, coming to PC later this year. The wrinkle? Session-based survival missions.

Instead of hitting up a server by yourself or with friends, you are tasked with survival in a variety of environments and biomes that you select, with a time limit attached. It could be hours, days, or weeks, but you and your crew have goals to accomplish in that time period. Of course, you also must build up and survive, tackling hunger, thirst, temperature extremes, and all the usual life metrics as you fend off deadly wildlife and worse.

At the higher difficulties, you have a lot more than bears to worry about as alien lifeforms challenge your attempts to build up a base and thrive. With up to seven friends at a time, you are encouraged to build, build, and build again. Whereas traditional survival server domination occurs after a time where a ton of high-tech resources are available to anyone strolling into a "completed" environment, this model ensures that survival remains the core component as continual resets create conflict. However, players can take back loot from their missions to store in their space station and use these resources to gain a sort of "meta" advantage over time. So, despite the game being organized into set survival sessions, you can develop a stash of high-end power loot and progression advantages so that you're ready to tackle harder and harder environments. Furthermore, anything you bring down to a planet creates risk for you, as you need to make sure you have an opportunity to bring it back up before the mission ends.

Icarus, with its multitude of timed missions, eschews the procedurally generated model that many games in the genre employ, instead featuring handcrafted experiences that are designed to test players' skills across a variety of biomes in each drop. With a wide variety of missions, goals, biomes, and scenarios available, each with their own time limit, finding a challenging-yet-rewarding option from the select screen should be a breeze.

While we've all picked berries, punched trees, and mined rocks to build makeshift homesteads over the years, the concept of continually refreshing things to keep the experience full of tension and intensity as storms shatter shelters and bears come barging in could reinvigorate the experience, familiar as it is. We'll see just how the mission-based structure plays out later this year. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Online Action

» **Publisher**
RocketWerkz

» **Developer**
RocketWerkz

» **Release**
2021

Gord

Staying alive

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player
Simulation

» **Publisher**
Covenant.dev

» **Developer**
Covenant.dev

» **Release**
2022

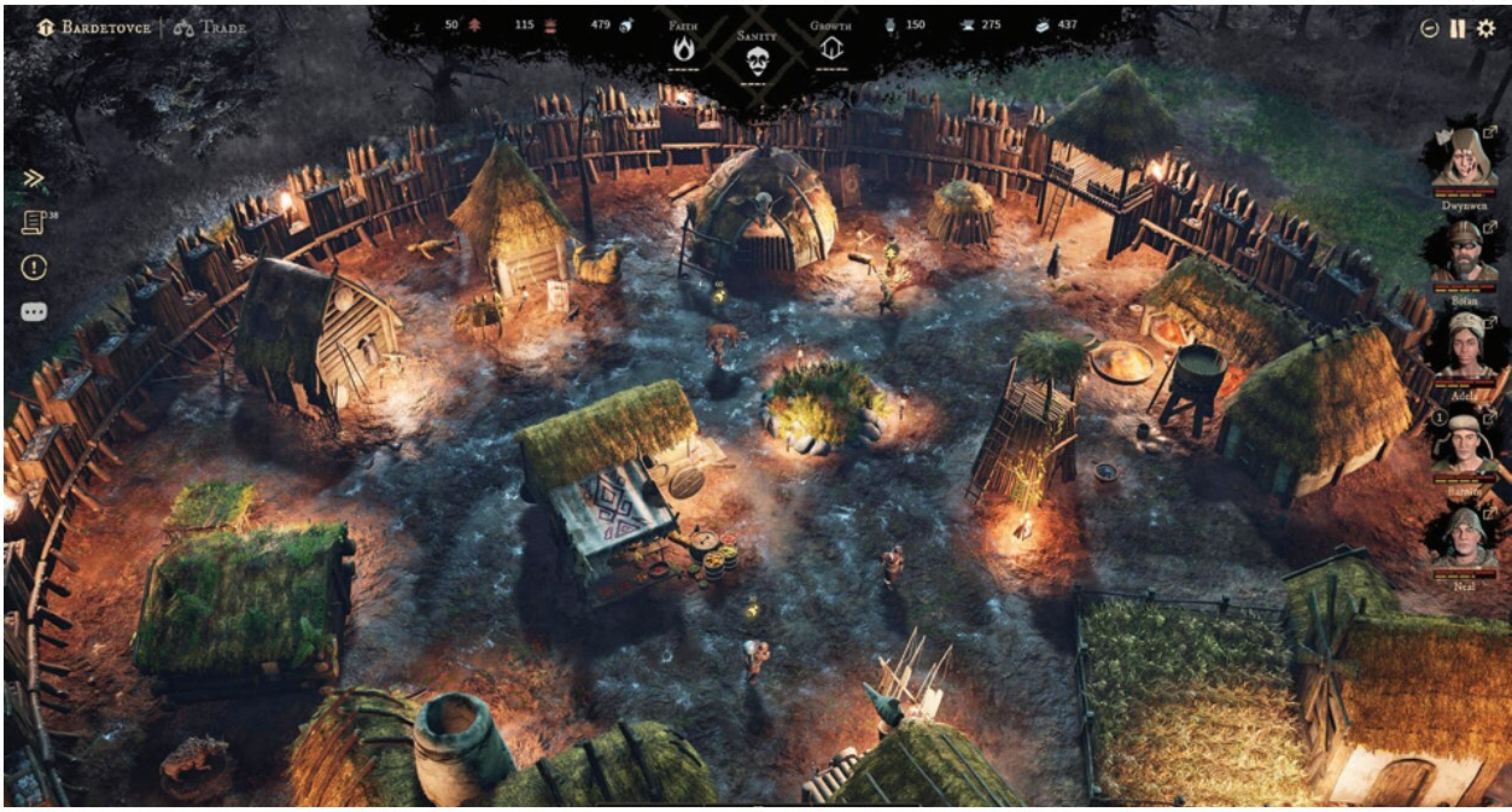
Tapping into Slavic lore, Gord presents a rather unpleasant proposition for you to set up a successful city. If you took the legends and mythos that the Witcher series was built on and sluiced it into a settlement building simulation, you've got the core crux of Gord. The project is the first game being put together by developer Covenant.dev, founded by Stan Just, formerly of CD Projekt Red.

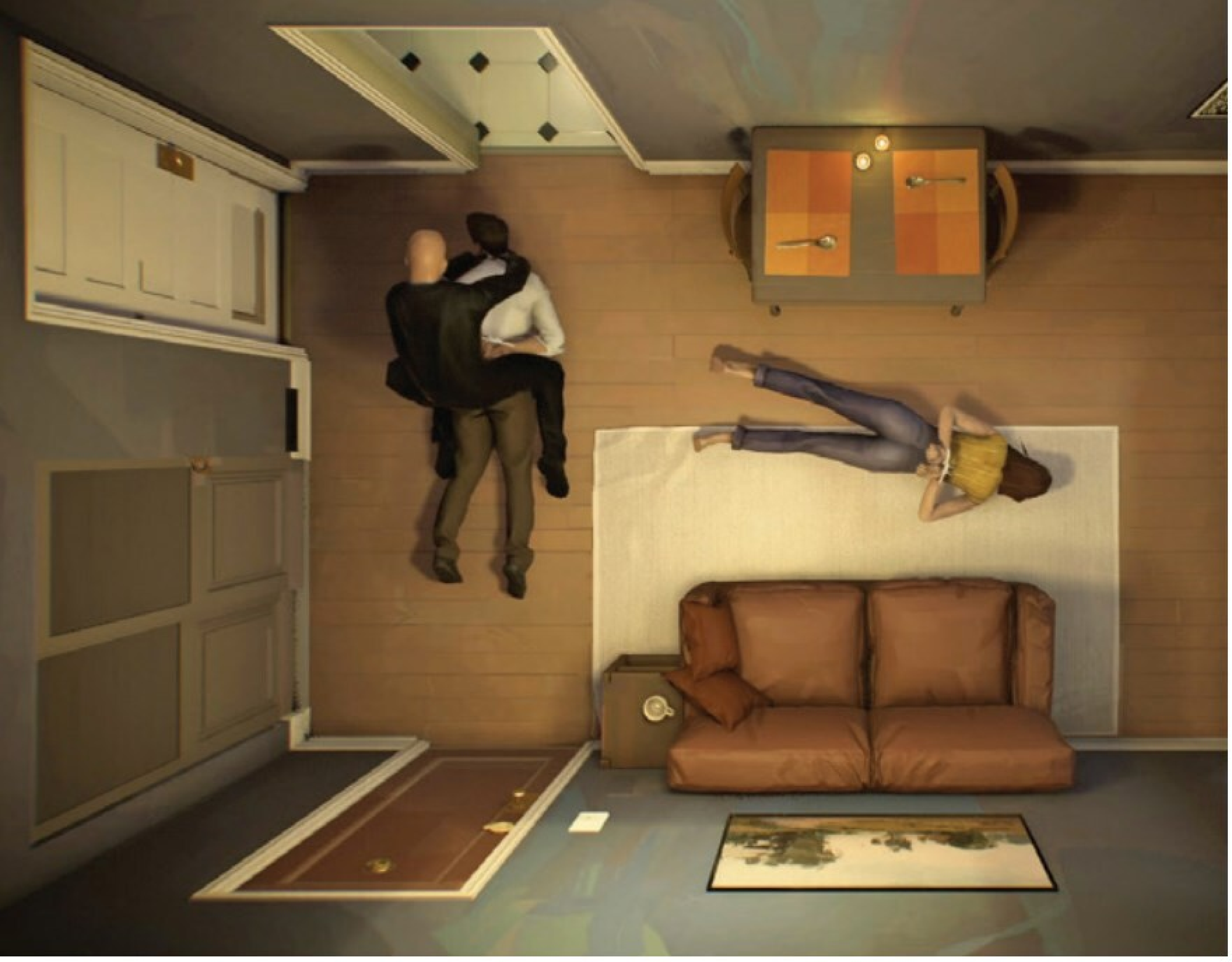
Gord plays out differently each and every time, making it a sort of roguelike experience as well as settlement builder. While your citizens will continue to have needs in terms of food, sanity, health, and shelter, the specific scenarios and terrors that they face, growing from fledgling hovels into bustling towns, are different each time. Combat is part of the game, but it's important to know that when you're not defending your citizens from giant spiders, you're tiering up your city and keeping your people happy. And you have to do this while dealing with elder horrors and truly terrible entities as well, that may demand everything up to human sacrifice from your populace. Gord is not a happy land where you build a SimCity, it is instead an attempt at survival in extremely hazardous woodlands that are plagued with unsavory threats ranging from the natural to the supernatural.

Plenty of procedurally generated elements impact each run, including a bevy of possible quests and tasks. You never know what's going to happen, so each time you start a city you have different priorities and goals to chase in order to secure the most possible resources and supplies. Having access to those additional gains makes survival more likely, though nothing is certain, and chaos is always waiting to erupt. You won't win every game, but with learning and careful play, you may not have your population end up wolf food every time you start from scratch.

The night is dark and full of terrors, but you do have a few special powers to help you combat the endless malevolent forces. Praying to the gods may result in some serious advantages and potent spells that can turn things around for you. While you can't rely on this kind of power all the time, proper utilization of these techniques to either take command of an incoming beastly threat or destroy an opposing tribe from within could save you from certain defeat. From game to game, you unlock permanent entries in a giant chronicle, allowing dedicated players to have something to look forward to even if each run serves as its own separate playthrough.

While we'll have to wait until next year to learn what Gord can really serve up, I'm looking forward to seeing where the grim sim takes us. » **Daniel Tack**





12 Minutes

Time changes everything

The last five minutes of your life have been great. Arriving home, your wife is in a fantastic mood. She asks you to dance around the living room. It's silly, but you do. She's made you your favorite dessert, too. As you sit down to eat, she reveals a gift. When you open it, you're greeted with baby clothes. You're going to be a father. And then there's a knock on the door.

The next five minutes of your life are going to be hell. On the other side of the door is a man claiming to be a cop. He says he has a warrant. You let him in. He accuses your wife of murdering her own father eight years ago. For whatever reason, he's insistent on finding a pocket watch that belonged to your wife's father. Apprehending the both of you, tying your hands behind your back, the cop chokes you until you fall unconscious. When you wake up, you're inside the doorway of your apartment, five minutes ago, as if nothing ever happened. What do you do next?

Your wife comes out of the bathroom. She's made you dessert. She has a present for you. You tell her about the cop. You ask her why she killed her father. She is insulted and confused. What are you talking about? Five minutes later, the cop is back.

So goes the opening of 12 Minutes, developed by Luis Antonio, starring James McAvoy, Daisy Ridley, and Willem Dafoe. How you progress, largely, is up to experimentation. Playing the first 45 minutes or so, I tried my hand at whatever I could. I called 911. I hid my wife in the bathroom while I tried to stall the cop. In a moment of helplessness, I killed my wife, flushed the murder weapon, and hid in the closet, allowing the cop to stumble upon the body. At every turn, the game reacted to my decisions. Not that it ever did me much good. No matter what I tried, time always reset. I was never solving the puzzle, just finding more pieces.

"12 Minutes never tells you what to do," Antonio says. "So, as things get more and more complex, it's going to be a bit of your own interpretation of how things are going."

12 Minutes takes place in one location: your apartment. During my time with the game, loops ran roughly five to seven minutes; five minutes before the cop shows up, a couple minutes after as everything falls apart. Each run gives you more knowledge of the situation, and no run felt like time wasted.

"The small space allows for very quick iteration where if you make a mistake or you want to try something, you have a very small [window]," Antonio says. "You have a very quick answer to your experiment; you're not trying 50 things and then you fail at action 49. You do two actions; you know very quickly."

My time playing 12 Minutes is short, but immediately interesting. Since completing the demo, I've been thinking about what I want to do differently when I play again. If the rest of 12 Minutes can deliver on the intrigue of its opening hour, it could be a unique take on the timeloop genre. Time will only tell. » **Blake Hester**

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Annapurna Interactive

» Developer
Luis Antonio

» Release
2021

Neo: The World Ends With You

Teaming with potential

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC
» Style
1-Player Role-Playing
» Publisher
Square Enix
» Developer
Square Enix
» Release
July 27 (PS4, Switch), 2021 (PC)

Fans have waited 14 long years for a follow-up to The World Ends With You, and that patience will finally be rewarded this summer. Neo: The World Ends With You is a sequel that takes place three years after Neku and his friends endured the challenge of the Reapers' Game. It features a fresh cast, a stronger emphasis on teamwork, and boasts a plethora of new powers.

The star of the show is Rindo, a high schooler who finds his way into the Reapers' Game. If you didn't play The World Ends With You, this deadly contest pits chosen souls of the dead in a week-long challenge meant to determine the worth of humanity. Winners can choose to either be brought back to life or to become Reapers themselves, gaining immense power used to battle players in future games. Losers, meanwhile, are erased from existence.

Whereas the first game was about forming pacts with one other partner, Neo pits full teams of players against each other. Thus, Rindo becomes the leader of his team, the Wicked Twisters. He's joined by Fret, his cheerful classmate, Nagi, a college student, and former antagonist Minamimoto. They'll face the Noise, monsters that come in many shapes and sizes, plus a mix of new Reapers and familiar foes such as Kariya and Uzuki. The biggest return, though, is Neku himself, but Square Enix is keeping quiet on his exact role, only describing it as "important." Sounds like it'll be more than just a cameo appearance.

Neo shifts the experience to full 3D and, unlike the first game, doesn't feature any touch controls (even on Switch). Players control every member of the Wicked Sisters simultaneously with each character assigned to a specific button. The setup sounds similar to the combat in games like Valkyrie Profile or Indivisible, and players can hit multiple buttons at the same time to unleash combination attacks.

A new slate of Pins, items that bestow special abilities, include a flaming sword strike and the power to summon ice pillars underneath opponents. Fans will also find revamped versions of Pins from the first game, such as Entanglement and Flame Blast. Additionally, Rindo and his friends each possess a unique psychic ability. Rindo's power is called Replay, which allows him to revisit and alter past events to create new, and hopefully better, outcomes. Replay is a scripted power that only occurs during specific moments once per day.

The Shibuya ward of Tokyo remains the setting of the game, but it's much larger this time around. Neo's expanded scope has allowed the team to craft a version of the popular commercial area that's closer in scale to the real thing, and now includes the Harajuku district as well. Visually, the design reflects Shibuya's changes in the 14 years since the original game launched. Neo's campaign is still mission-based, but players can engage in new side activities including helping Shibuya's residents with their problems, though details are still murky as to what that entails.

Neo has a lot of new tricks but retains other elements fans fell in love with the first time around. The stylish art direction and comic panel cutscenes remain in full force. Composer Takeharu Ishimoto returns with a hip new soundtrack, too. We can't wait to tackle this fresh take on the Reapers' Game when Neo: The World Ends With You arrives on PlayStation 4 and Switch on July 27. Square Enix recently announced the game is coming to PC sometime later this year as well. » **Marcus Stewart**

Life Is Strange: True Colors

A telling tale about mystery, death, and the true power of empathy

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Deck Nine

» Release
September 10

Life is Strange: True Colors carries on the series' tradition of tackling complicated subjects and shining a light on extraordinary people enduring difficult times. Players take on the role of Alex Chen, whose powers are unlike anything we've seen before in this narrative-driven franchise. Alex can experience, absorb, and manipulate powerful emotions around her; she can even see auras. Following the "accidental" death of her brother, her powers come roaring to the surface without mercy, and it's those powers that take her on a journey to uncover the truth once and for all.

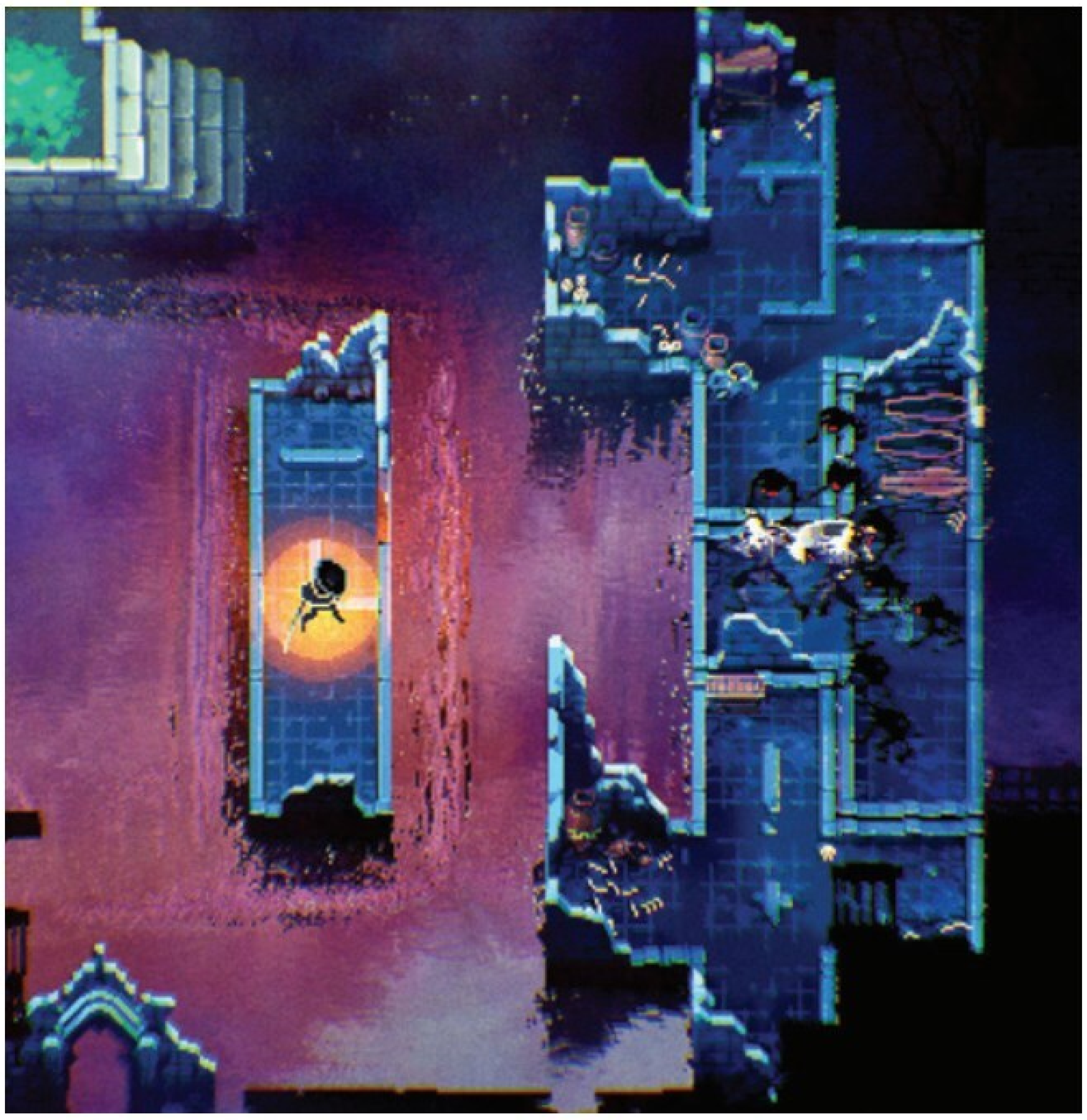
What makes the Life is Strange franchise so incredible is its relatability. These stories feel real, despite the supernatural powers. Real loss, real connection, and a quest for truth are things we've all been through. Life is Strange: True Colors ensures that this path continues in all its emotive glory.

"The process of bringing Alex to life, from my perspective, was all personal," Erika Mori, the voice of Alex, says. "Even though I don't have the same history with Alex, I certainly know what it feels like to lose someone you love, to feel deep grief, sorrow, and rage. Fear and joy. That exists for all of us and being able to draw from personal experiences in a healthy and safe way really helped to [make] Alex fully endearing and relatable."

Felice Kuan, the lead writer for True Colors, says that the heart of the latest Life is Strange journey is authenticity. When dealing with trauma and vulnerability, it's imperative to keep the story rooted in reality and respect for the human experience. For that reason, the studio decided to move away from the usual Life is Strange episodic format and plans to release True Colors in one complete package.

Life is Strange: True Colors is poised to tell an important story. It has magic, it has mystery, but it also has heart and aims to offer the player permission to be open and vulnerable in their own experiences. » **Liana Ruppert**

Port Royale 4
ALSO ON PS4/XBOX
STARTOPIA
ALSO ON PS4/PS5/XBOX
PS5
DELUXE EDITION
void tRrLM();++ //Void Terrarium++
VERY VERY VALET
PS5
Bibi&Tina ... at the Horse Farm
ALSO ON PS4/SWITCH
SNOWRUNNER
ALSO ON PS4/XBOX
PS5
CAN'T DRIVE THIS
PS5
CRAZY CHICKEN SHOOTER EDITION
WANTED
REMAKE
COMING IN MAY
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+
E-M
ESRB esrb.org

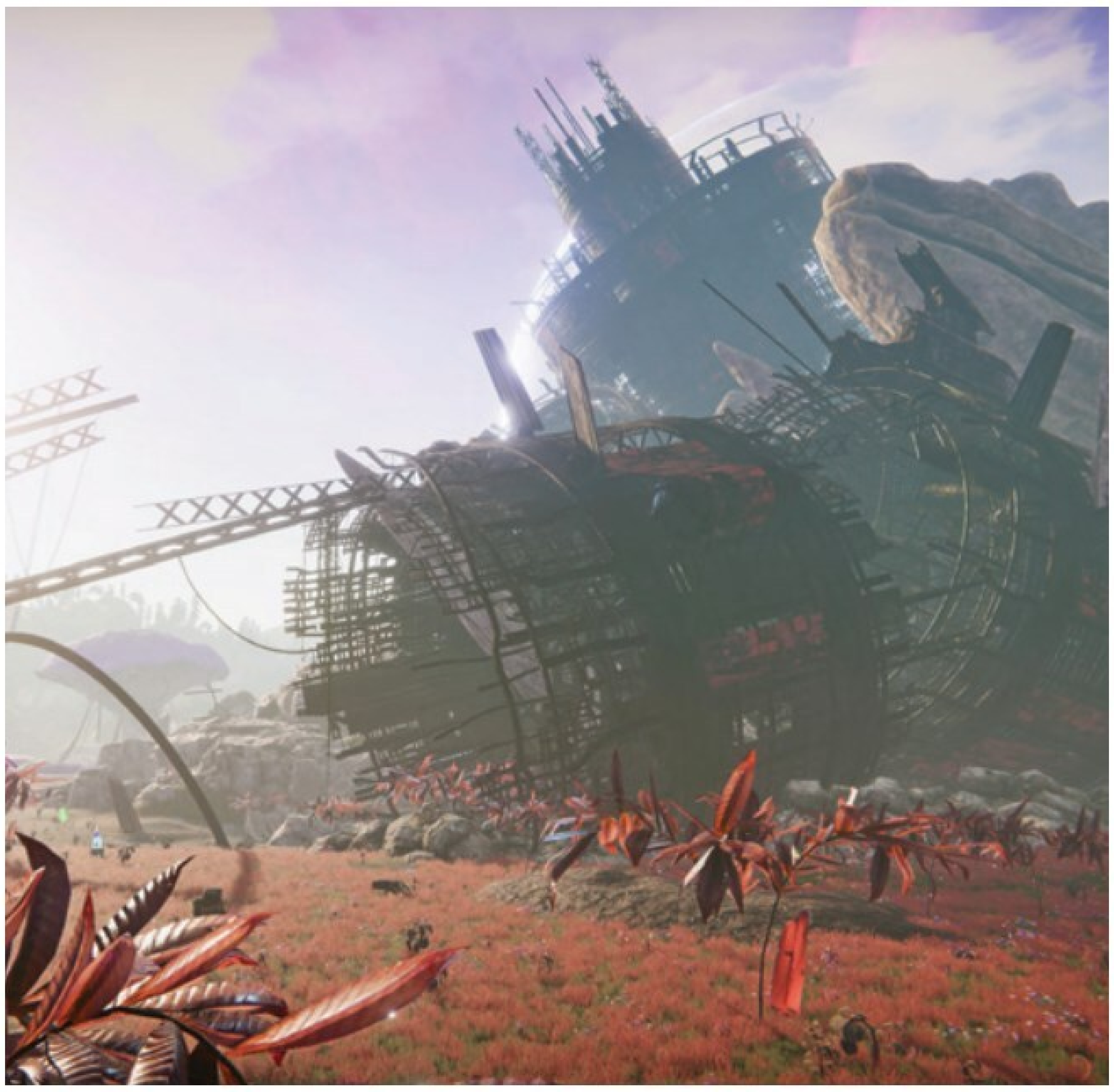


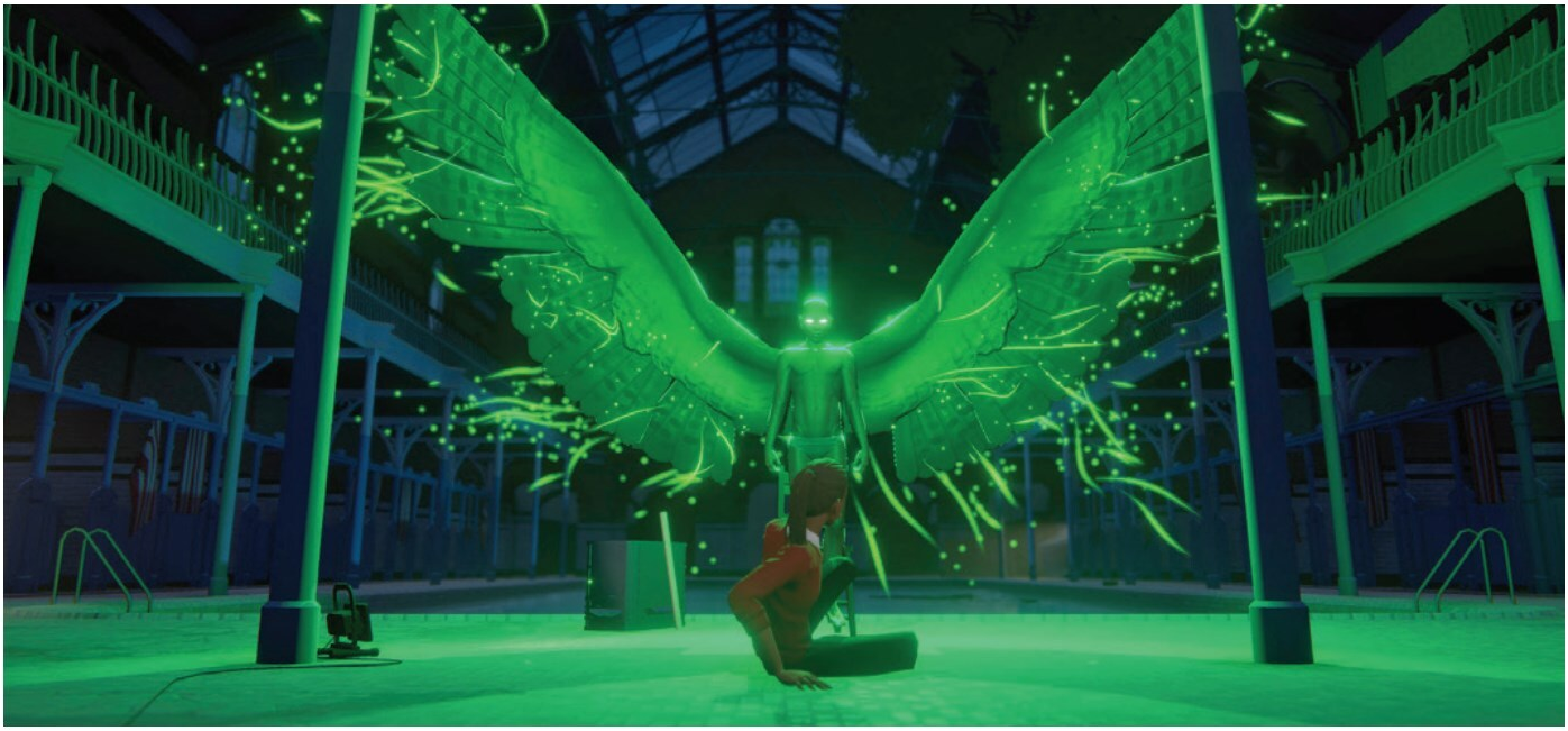
Loot River

Have you ever wanted to combine precision-combat with consequences and ... Tetris? Well that's what Loot River aims to be, a roguelike with all kinds of blocky contrivances as you formulate your path through procedurally-generated encounters. Move deftly in and out of combat by switching block placements around like a puzzle master. Loot River is coming to Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, and PC.

Edge Of Eternity

After a successful two-year run in Steam Early Access, the Final Fantasy-inspired Edge of Eternity is finally gearing up for a full launch. Battles play out in strategic, turn-based fashion, with a narrative that promises branching quests, difficult choices, and intense personal moments. Edge of Eternity comes to PC on June 8 with PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, and Xbox One versions to follow in late 2021. The Xbox versions are also set to arrive on Game Pass.





Last Stop

The latest game from Virginia developer Variable State and publisher Annapurna Interactive is a tale about what happens when the mundane collides with the supernatural. It follows three separate characters, all fighting the private battles we face every day, only to be unexpectedly tied together thanks to a supernatural crisis deep within the heart of London. With a killer soundtrack from BAFTA award-winning composer Lyndon Holland, this role-playing game has a lot of heart, because despite the wild twists and turns, it's still a story about human connection. Last Stop is expected to arrive in July on Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, and PC.

Oxenfree II: Lost Signals

A surprise announcement during Nintendo's Indie World event in April, Night School Studio is following up its 2016 hit with Oxenfree II: Lost Signals. We still don't know much, but we do know that it takes place five years after the original and that it stars a new protagonist, Riley, as she returns to her hometown Carmena in search of mysterious radio signals. Oxenfree II is expected to be released sometime this year on Switch and PC. No word yet about other consoles.

Aztech Forgotten Gods

Step into the shoes of Achtli, a woman facing off against massive deities, in an adventure inspired by Aztec mythology. This 3D action title has Achtli using an ancient artifact to turn the eponymous Forgotten Gods' powers against them in colossal boss battles and fast-paced exploration in a far-future Mesoamerican metropolis. Aztech Forgotten Gods comes to PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC this fall.

Lemnis Gate

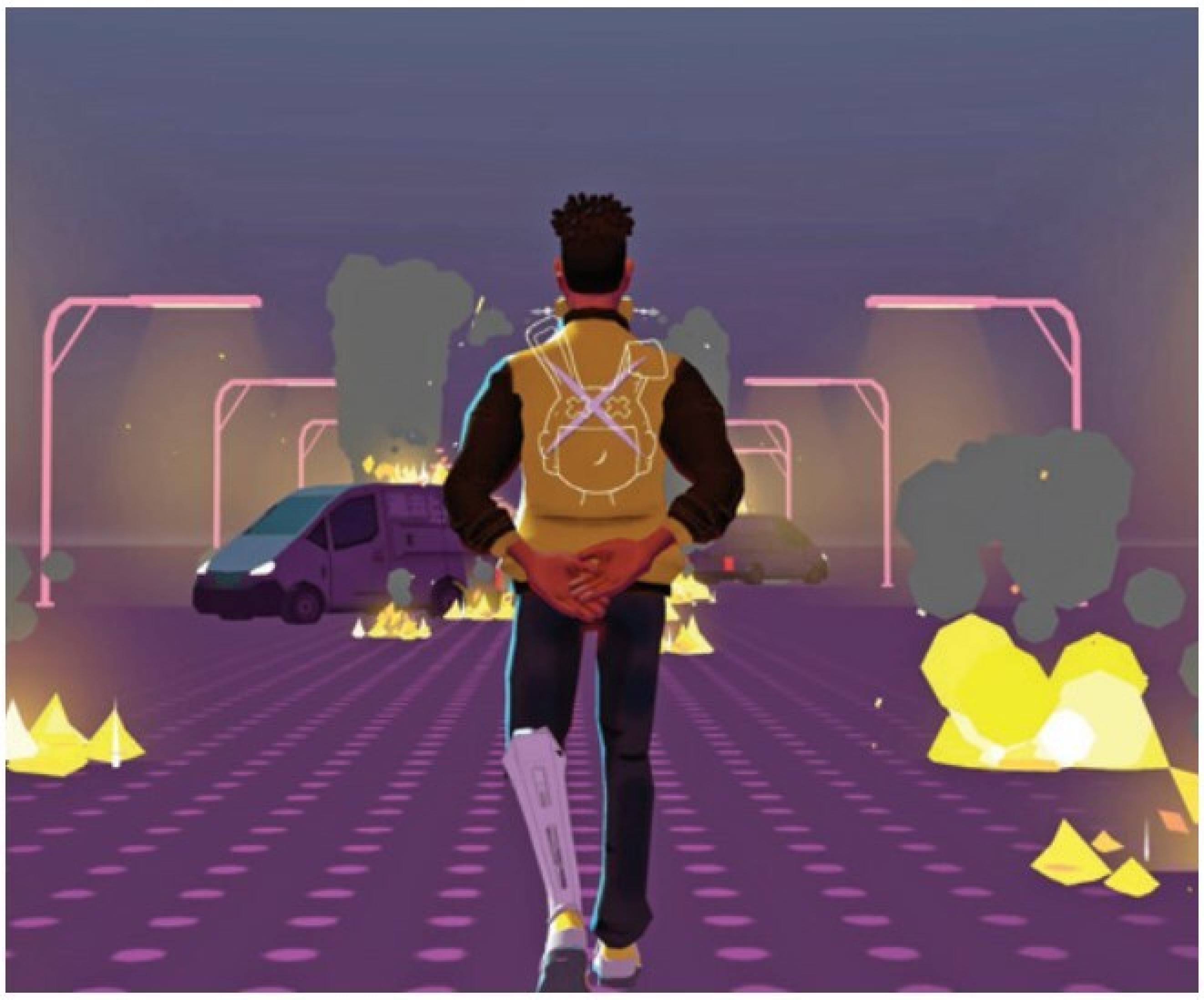
Get ready for tactical time-warping with Lemnis Gate, where you must master past, present, and future in a turn-based strategy format. While turn-based strategy games can get mired in minutiae and excessive planning, in Lemnis Gate, you've got to pack everything into twenty-five second time loops in a first-person shooter world, making it a bit of a curiosity. Lemnis Gate is expected to arrive on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, and PC this year.

The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles

Hold it! The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles, which takes fans back to the dawn of the 20th century, is making its way to North America. The collection features both The Great Ace Attorney: Adventures and The Great Ace Attorney 2: Resolve, originally released in Japan on the 3DS and mobile. To make the wait worthwhile, the package also contains perks like dual Japanese and English audio, a new auto-advancing story mode, and other bonus content. You can get ready to shout "Objection!" when The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles launches on July 27 for PS4, Switch, and PC.

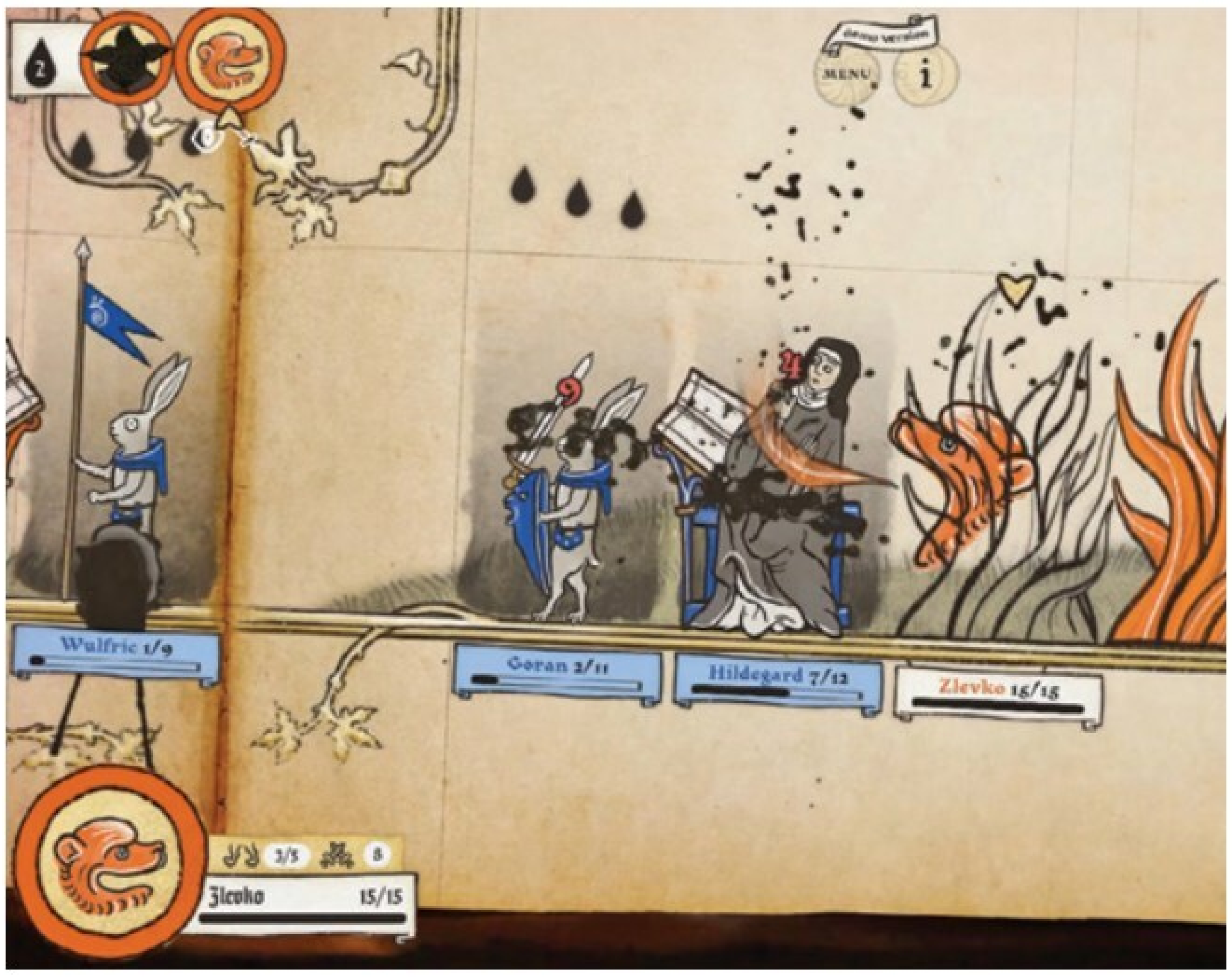
Thymesia

Games inspired by Dark Souls are a dime a dozen, but Thymesia hopes to stand out from that crowded pack with its lightning-quick combat and unique premise. Players control Corvus, a plague doctor who can absorb diseases from enemies and transform those ailments into physical weapons. If using that bizarre ability isn't enough, Corvus can also morph into his Raven Form, allowing him to throw feathers like daggers. Thymesia is the debut title from Taiwanese developer OverBorder Studio, and while it may look a tad derivative, we can't deny that the action looks entertaining. It's expected to land on PC at a yet-to-be-specified date.



Aerial_Knight's Never Yield

What began as a one-man passion project by the titular Aerial_Knight has become a full-fledged adventure. Players control Wally, a robot-legged teen who races to recover something lost to him while also harboring a truth that could rock his Tokyo-flavored home of Detroit. Never Yield's endless runner gameplay is evocative of speedrunning as players sprint, jump, dash, and slide across various obstacles and enemies. The game oozes style thanks to its visual blend of eastern and western influences and a hip hop soundtrack composed by Detroit's own Danime-Sama with help from artists of color around the world. We look forward to seeing if Never Yield plays as good as it looks and sounds when it launches May 19 for Switch and PC.

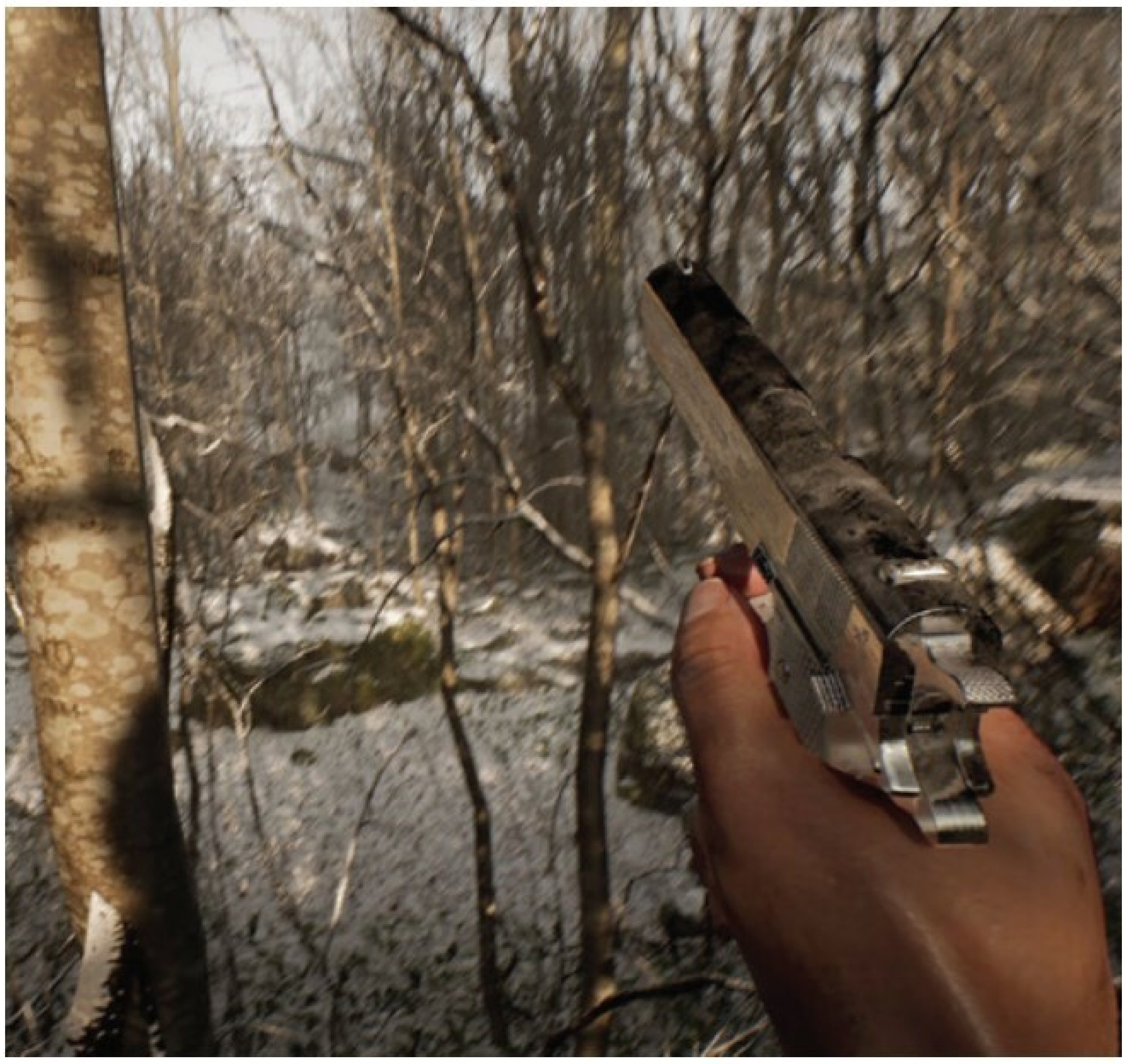


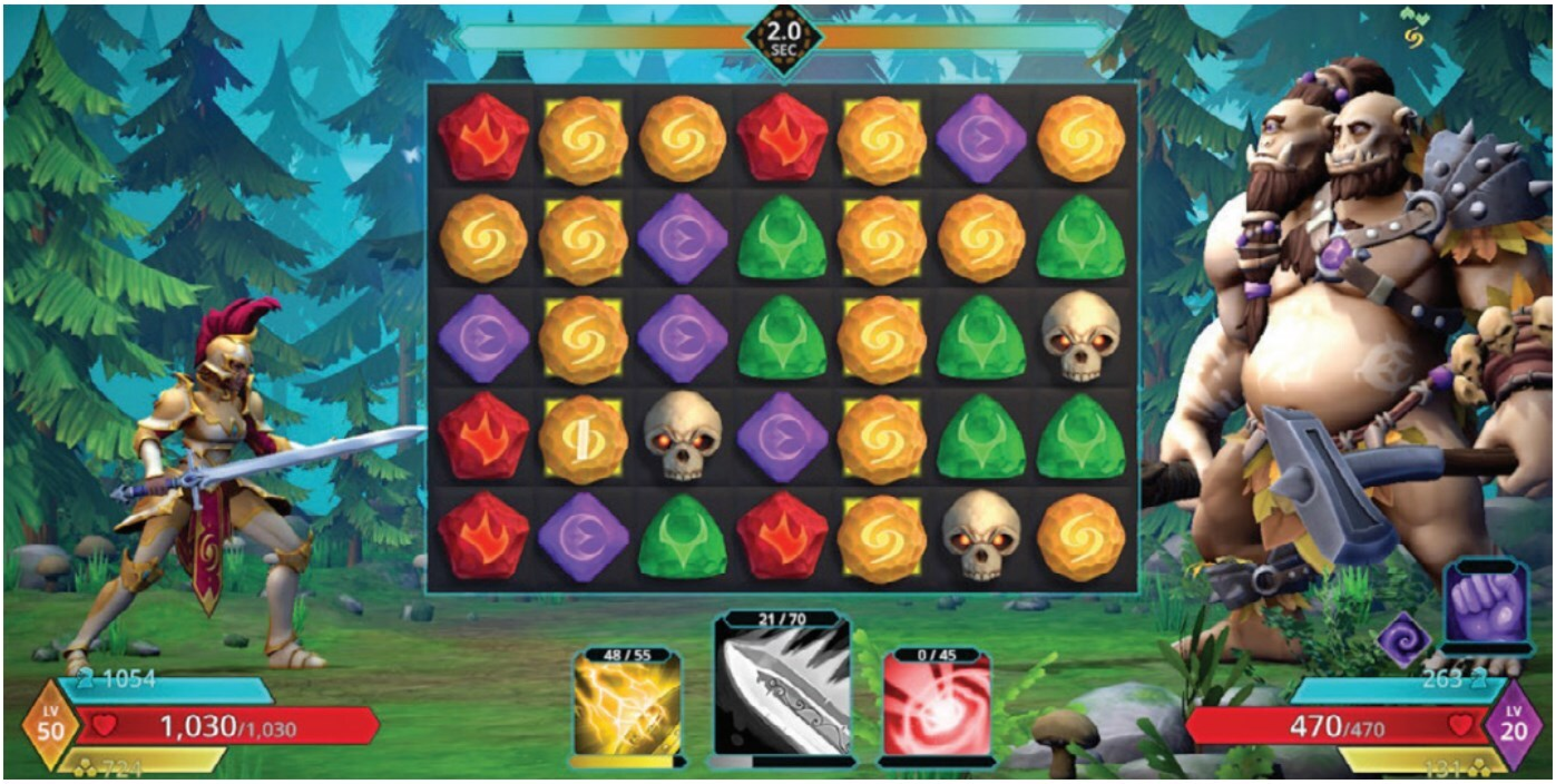
Inkulinati

Inkulinati's wonderful art direction and irreverent humor offer a fun twist to the strategy genre. The game resembles a medieval manuscript come to life, and as great as it looks in still images, the art is even more charming in motion. As a master of the Living Ink, players build, or rather draw, a party of beastial units including dogs, snails, and rabbits, all lined up on a 2D battlefield. Both you and the opposing master sit in the back, and whichever side can work their way through the other's units and eliminate their foe wins. Attacks include obscene gestures like farting or pooping on enemies, and savvy players can even push units off the edge of the stage for an instant kill. Inkulinati looks as inventive as it is silly, and we can't wait to get our hands on it when it comes to PC later this year.

Abandoned

Blue Box Game Studios is bringing this supernaturally-touched survival experience exclusively to PlayStation 5 later this year. Little is known about the game at the moment except that you must find your way out of the woods after being kidnapped by ostensibly hostile and sinister forces. The game focuses on realism for many of the survival elements, with fear and exertion taking a toll on your abilities. Ammo is a precious, limited resource as you attempt to make your way back to civilization.





Puzzle Quest 3

The potent hybrid of puzzling and RPG returns at last with Puzzle Quest 3, currently available on Android in early access and coming to PC later this year. The popular formula has received a free-to-play format this time around, with the compelling match-style gameplay backed up with timed-unlock rewards and incentives. Players can engage with a variety of classes, collect gear, and increase their abilities over time as they explore distinct locales and take on a variety of monsters. ◆

reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 336

74 Returnal

Returnal is a triumph for developer Housemarque, combining blistering fast third-person shooting and atmospheric excellence. The PlayStation 5 exclusive showcases breathtaking, horrifying environments and compelling roguelike gameplay loops as players attempt to pilot Selene on a voyage of dark discovery. No run is the same, and mastering the variables is as important as learning the precision timing behind each enemy attack.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	This score is non-fungible.

Outriders

Chaos that surprises in the best way

Style 1-Player Shooter (3-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** People Can Fly **Release** April 1 **Rating** M

Outriders is an explosively chaotic looter shooter that pulls from the best of People Can Fly's previous games while offering a new tale that takes some seriously wild turns. I love shooters and RPGs, and Outriders amalgamates these genres perfectly. The entire adventure is macabre with a dark narrative that centers on survival, the ability to adapt, and the journey to prove you're the biggest badass on the playground. That storyline is more immersive than I expected, and while it takes about an hour to really pick up momentum, it eventually becomes a cacophony of in-your-face action.

Outriders begins its adventure on Enoch, a planet that was meant to be a fresh start for humankind, a salvation brimming with promise. While the opening sequence goes all-in on action, the true start of the story kicks in soon after, focusing on the fight-or-flight instincts necessary in a world challenging what it means to be a survivor. The fast-paced, action-packed moments convey the need to keep moving, and those moments are even starker thanks to calm-before-the-storm story sequences that introduce the characters along the way. The characters feel wholly different from each other, with some offering a return of innocence to this world and others showing the brutal reality of what it's like to stay on top when the rest of the planet wants you dead. The intermittent scenes of normalcy add a layer of depth that enriches the game.

Outriders provides a playstyle for everyone. The Trickster allows you to teleport behind an enemy when they are paralyzed for a K.O. It feels intrinsically satisfying, and nothing compares to being able to slow time itself to control the battlefield. Devastators are strong, meaty, and can control gravity, which gives them a protective edge, letting them draw fire from your crew and send enemies into the abyss. Pyromancers are a medium-ranged class that specializes in AOE damage by wielding the destructive power of fire. The firewall skill plows through enemies in an especially satisfying way. While not as durable as other classes, a Pyromancer's explosive arsenal makes them the perfect addition to any group taking on the world of Enoch. Lastly, the Technomancer is a great class for those who love engineering specs because it harnesses technology to meaningfully rain damage from the sky.

The gear in Outriders actually matters. People Can Fly did a great job providing a wide variety of weapons of all types offering meaningful impacts on the moment-to-moment action.

There are varying degrees of gear as well, including the coveted Legendaries. Some of these designs are very detailed and impressive. Outriders has some of the best weapon designs of any game out there, including one gun that looks like it popped straight out of Bloodborne. One shotgun looks like an Apex Legends character threw pure radiation at a wall and decided to turn it into a weapon. Seeing the unique designs kept me motivated to hunt down Legendaries; even if I didn't necessarily care about the stats, I wanted everything I could possibly find to see what other elaborate designs were in the game.

But Outriders is much more about how the game feels versus how it looks and the gunplay is just as impressive as its aesthetics. The baseline guns all feel very different from one another. Weapons continue to scale in power as you progress, but players have the option to tailor that combat style even further with the use of gear mods. Mods help to further the customizable experience with different options to achieve a certain build. Mod types include buffs, ways to enhance current skills, and how to boost your offense and/or your defense. They aren't the end-all-be-all of character craftsmanship, but like in Destiny, they're a vital part of taking your character to the next level. Some even help you heal faster when fighting, which is especially helpful for those exploring Enoch solo. Fire damage, decay, leeching, there are a ton of different mods that are broken up into three tiers.

While the endgame isn't as deep as Destiny 2, Outriders' content feels meaningful in a way that will draw dedicated players while not leaving casual gamers feeling like they are missing out. The campaign and the endgame are balanced thoughtfully and in a way that does the looter shooter genre a profound service.

Outriders isn't revolutionary, and it's not trying to be. It is a well-thought-out shooter with expertly tailored RPG twists. It's an enjoyable ride that is made infinitely better by playing with friends, but not inherently hurt by running solo either. Outriders takes the best parts from other looter-shooters and the best aspects of sci-fi RPGs and blends them into an experience worth diving into because of its high replayability, customizable play style, and fun story. I'm already strapping in for another run. » **Liana Ruppert**

9

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Level up your Outrider, master your Altered powers, and find out what went wrong when searching for paradise

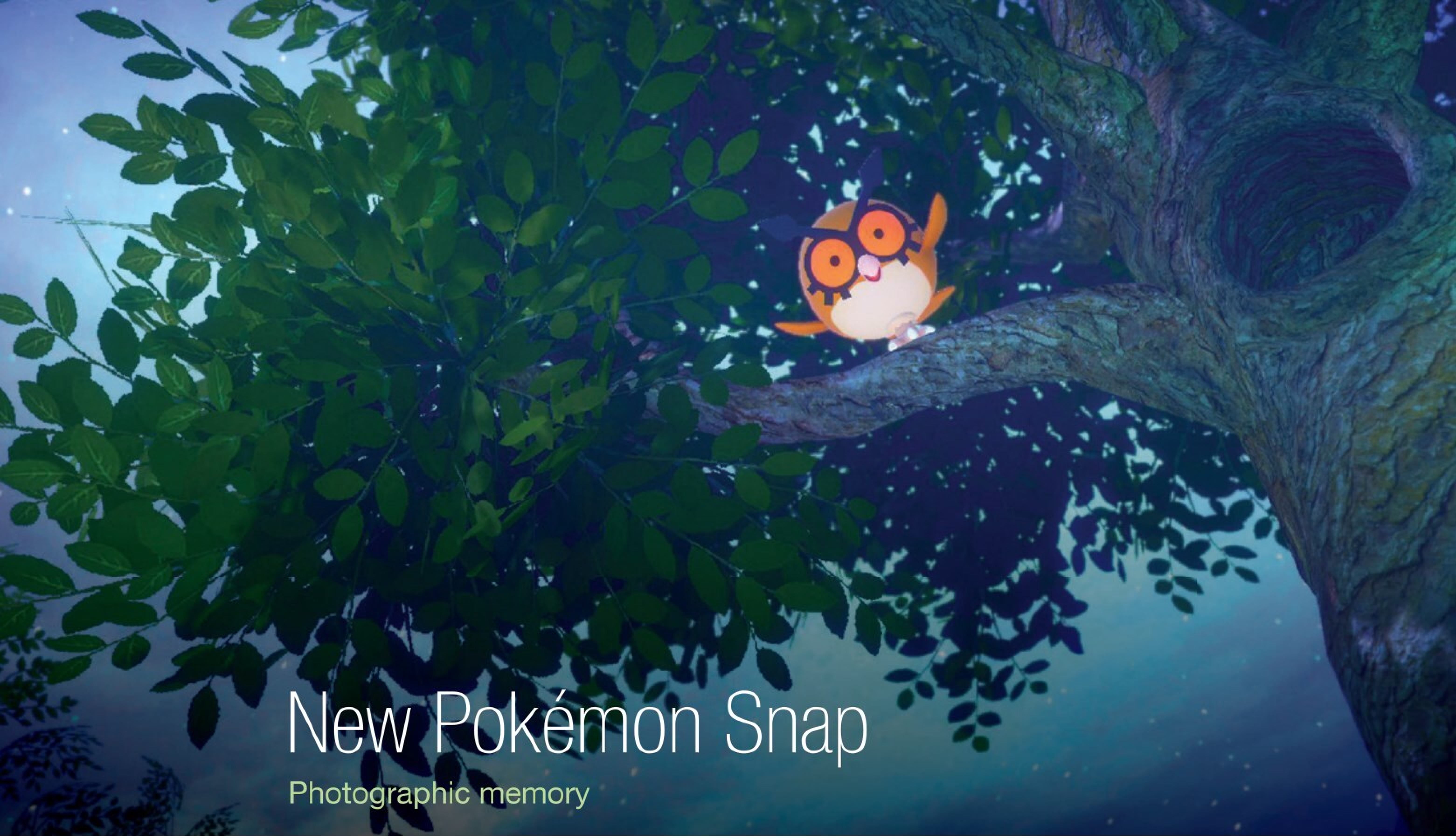
» Graphics
Overall, the graphics are a little dated, but the cutscenes display stunning facial animations that offer a subtle layer of realism to all character interactions. The different areas of Enoch are incredibly beautiful

» Sound
The music ramps everything up to level 10, especially in combat. While not a focus, the music paired with different ability sounds makes it easy to get lost in the fray in the best way possible

» Playability
Navigating skill trees and gear leveling is easy to use and enjoyable to experiment with, and the gun mechanics feel weighted in a realistic way that is satisfying

» Entertainment
Taking to combat and combo-ing skills with other players is immensely satisfying and makes each run-in with enemies exhilarating rather than a chore

» Replay Value
Moderately high



New Pokémon Snap

Photographic memory

8.5

Switch

» Concept
Travel through on-rails levels photographing Pokémon in their natural habitats

» Graphics
Impressive and vibrant visuals are only occasionally brought down by performance hiccups

» Sound
Audio cues fill the environment, rewarding those who listen to their surroundings with the best photo opportunities

» Playability
Simple and intuitive controls allow anyone to pick up and play

» Entertainment
The thrill of nabbing the perfect shot never dulls, but the repetition of traveling through the same environments sometimes grows weary

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Bandai Namco Studios **Release** April 30 **Rating** E

More than two decades removed from Pokémon Snap's debut on Nintendo 64, this unique gaming experience is finally back. New Pokémon Snap effectively carries on the spirit of the original game, tasking you to get the best possible photographs of Pokémon as you travel through environments on a rail line. And while it delivers all the excitement of nabbing the perfect snapshot, like any photography adventure, it's not without a few undeveloped negatives.

New Pokémon Snap has players assisting Professor Mirror in his research of the Lental region, a diverse area of the world featuring foggy forests, bustling beaches, and more. However, instead of helping the professor by catching and battling the monsters, you use your photography skills to capture them in a different sense of the word.

As you phase into any given level, you're immediately surrounded by critters to frame up in the lens. With intuitive controls to photograph and interact with Pokémon at your disposal, speed is of the essence, as the Pokémon probably won't stay in place for long. Whether it's a Pikachu dashing along the shoreline or a Liepard lounging in the trees, you rarely have a shortage of potential subjects to observe and snap. Seeing these Pokémon from the first-person perspective is a wondrous experience, giving you an up-close-and-personal way to interact with the series' beloved creatures.

New Pokémon Snap does a terrific job of balancing the Pokémon in the environment; I rarely felt bored or overwhelmed by the number of creatures I came across. Since you're traveling through their habitats, not all of the Pokémon are interested in interacting with you. Thankfully, you have various tools at your disposal to draw their attention. Fluffruit nudges and lures Pokémon to a specific spot, a melody player encourages them to dance, your scanner reveals information about your surroundings, and Illumina orbs cause creatures and plants to glow. I loved trying to figure out which tool would evoke the reaction I want from the Pokémon I'm trying to shoot; one creature might have zero interest in dancing or eating, but an Illumina orb might give them a burst of energy, causing them to perform a signature move.

Even the most swivel-headed photographers are sure to miss plenty their first time through an environment. In my initial journey into a sea level, my jaw dropped at some of the interactions taking place between Pokémon, like when a Wingull swooped down and

snagged a Finneon out of the water, and I missed my chance to document them. Thankfully, when you replay the levels (and you will plenty of times), you know what to expect the next time you make the trip. In that same session, I couldn't figure out how to get the best response out of the darting Sharpedo, but I had plenty of other chances thanks to repeat playthroughs.

Traveling through the environments numerous times can begin toeing the line of tedium, but New Pokémon Snap doles out new opportunities, whether that's variants of the same level, a new time of day, additional tools, or previously unseen areas. Traveling to the same stage during the night may as well be called a completely new stage due to just how distinct the opportunities are. A lot of species are nocturnal, and New Pokémon Snap capitalizes upon that through the different versions of the levels.

Even beyond day and night, New Pokémon Snap typically keeps the experience fresh within those same stages. Just as I was growing tired of shooting the same Pokémon on the seafloor, I received a new tool that allowed me to solve a puzzle and open an entirely new route through the stage. Then, the new Pokémon I discovered on that alternate path gave me enough points to level up that area, creating additional opportunities and introducing even more Pokémon to observe. Unfortunately, if you're struggling to figure out how to get the best portrait of a particular monster, riding through the entire stage to get to that point only to fail once again can be frustrating.

Once you complete a run, you go through all the pictures you took and select one of each Pokémon to show to Professor Mirror. After you choose the shots you think will further your research (you can also have the game auto-select if you're in a hurry), it's time to see what the professor thinks of your work. Your photos are graded based on pose, size, direction, composition, and other factors, then assigned a score that goes towards ranking up the level in which you took them.

Documenting the region's diverse collection of monsters and filling your Photodex with more than 200 species is rewarding. Sadly, the grading system sometimes misses the mark, rewarding higher points to clearly inferior photos; my close-up shot of Wailord's tail splashing earned more points than a straight-on portrait of its entire body – simply because it was doing a unique pose. Similarly, my clear snap of Pikachu received a lower score than one where it was partially obscured by a tree. Seeing how my new snaps stacked up against my previous best is one of the most satisfying elements of the game, so it's disappointing when the grading system misfires.

As you build up your Photodex and help Professor Mirror with specific research requests, you unlock various rewards. I often disregarded the inconsequential Research Titles and Profile Icons, but I was always excited to unlock new filters to apply to shots that I saved to my photo albums.

While you can only submit your raw shots to Professor Mirror for Photodex consideration, New Pokémon Snap gives you the opportunity to "Re-Snap" anything in your camera. Using this nifty tool, you can reframe and readjust any picture you took, letting you correct any mistakes you made during hasty shoots. During one expedition, a Vivillon got just a little too close to me for it to be a great shot. However, using Re-Snap and the editing tools in the professor's lab, I could adjust the zoom, tweak the framing, and apply filters and even stickers to complete the look. These edited images may be useless to Professor Mirror's research, but they're fun to create and share.

New Pokémon Snap delivers an experience similar to that of the original while expanding on the formula in ways that prolong the appeal of the expedition. In the two decades since the first game's release, the Pokémon world has changed in innumerable ways, but the simple appeal of immersing yourself in this universe and taking pictures has remained unchanged.

» Brian Shea

Returnal

Haunting harmony

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 336

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Housemarque **Release** April 30 **Rating** T

9.5

PS5

» Concept
Battle your way through a mysterious alien world in a third-person shooter roguelike featuring intense bullet-hell action and atmospheric dread

» Graphics
Returnal's presentation is a massive treat, and while you can't always focus on the luscious visuals and lighting because you're dodging your demise, they are striking and powerful

» Sound
The amazing soundtrack by Bobby Krlic adds gloomy, dire tones to punctuate a potent palate of gunblasts and ruin crumbles that accompany the dark exploration

» Playability
Picking up a weapon and firing at your first batch of aliens is easy. However, experiencing Returnal should be accompanied by some tolerance for failure, frustration, and willingness to learn precise timing, as each journey can end abruptly and devastatingly

» Entertainment
Returnal brilliantly meshes roguelike mechanics with precise combat and enigmatic exploration, making for an excellent game

» Replay Value
High

Returnal is a powerful roguelike recipe offering intense combat, a drip-fed narrative of palpable dread, and a cohesive combination of artistic elements. Housemarque's third-person shooter delivers lightning-fast action transfused with incredible exploration, featuring equal doses of intensity and lingering unease. Every run is the start of something new, but what you learn over many failures provides an extra edge as you attempt to chart the sci-fi horror world of Atropos. Returnal deftly combines gameplay, graphics, and musical composition to create a haunting tapestry that's an absolute joy to partake in, even when a mistimed dodge or a sinister trap claims your life.

Returnal is a challenging game that puts relatively high demands on the player. There are no difficulty dials to tweak, so the experience can feel overbearing at times, especially in one of the later stages. While this adds to the overarching horror elements that exude from Returnal's core and enhances the sweaty grip-for-your-life moment of slaying a massive boss, it's important to note that it's possible to lose hours of potential progress in mere seconds should things go awry. Death is inevitable and can be devastating. Being willing to learn and ready to adapt your strategies and glean takeaways for future runs is essential. I felt the challenges presented by Returnal enhanced the nature of the unknown alien planet and that these elements contributed positively to the overall game. Still, some players may find these asks to be outside of their enjoyment range.

As Selene, who gets stranded on Atropos, your journey across the alien planet brings questions and exciting revelations. The story is communicated slice-by-slice over time as you work through different biomes, with each narrative piece adding one element to a larger puzzle that's a pleasure to work out. While anything but a blissful fairy tale, the narrative functions more like a soothing balm to the endless cycle of doomed runs and discomforting discoveries. When things were at their worst after a few failed runs, at least I was learning more about the mysteries that tie the world together. Try not to get spoiled by the story before playing the game, as it's a pleasure to put together clue-by-clue.

The exploration through the biomes is procedurally generated in some respects, but you learn to recognize rooms and what's inside each one over time. This knowledge is power. Exploring carefully and mastering each space can lead to discovering hidden powerups tucked away in hard-to-find places, whether they are behind false walls or just out of sight on a precipice above. In addition to the temporary build that you craft each run, there are other permanent unlocks for your character to uncover. As you make progress, areas that you couldn't previously access become available via tools like a grappling hook, hazard-protection boots, the ability to travel underwater, and more. Every time you find one of these new tools feels incredible as you can finally access areas that have taunted you with treasures for many, many runs. With each traversal find, you breathe a sigh of relief as a checkpoint is locked in.

Applying learned knowledge to situations and scenarios carries over to combat, which is incredibly fast and rooted in the "bullet-hell" genre. Players must avoid various objects on the screen, each with its own pattern and directional movement. Learning each pattern on standard enemies is a constant battle as you progress, as new and deadlier abilities and patterns regularly appear. Boss battles take this to the next level, and you will find yourself relying on muscle memory and perhaps uttering a quick prayer while attempting to dodge growing rings, moving barriers, and hundreds of projectiles at

varying speeds simultaneously. Throughout the game, you may be surprised at just what you can accomplish in this regard. Several times I said to myself, "No way," as the game pushed another blitz of swirling projectiles onto my screen, but with well-timed dodges and jumps, I shocked even myself. Patterns that seemed challenging at first became laughable as I mastered the game's many systems, and it felt great to complete encounters with finesse.

Avoiding things is half of the battle. The other half is shooting back. In Returnal, you unlock a variety of different weapons with various modes of fire and traits to unlock over time, which is sort of a permanent progression mechanic that improves your damage output from run to run. I became a huge fan of the rocket and grenade launcher archetypes and their various tweaks, which allowed me to pay more attention to getting out of the way while issuing my payloads. However, you never really know which weapon will be your best option during a run, so you have to become comfortable using a lot of them regardless. This keeps things fresh and had me stuck with one of my least favorite weapons during a particularly tough boss fight, but it's all part of the unpredictability that comes with each run. You never know what you're going to get, and you have to use everything together to survive. In true roguelike fashion, you may have runs with excellent weapons where you make a ton of progress across multiple biomes, and in others, you may perish a room or two into your adventure.

Risk and reward are intricately tied together in Returnal, as there are numerous upgrades you can find that come with the risk of a malfunction that debuffs your character when you collect them. This means you might be able to increase your health pool or collect some bonus resources, but you might get a serious penalty as a price, like losing 85 percent of your damage while stationary. You can ditch these penalties by completing different goals, so careful planning for when to take on the risk of malfunctions is essential, as they can completely change the way you play. A late-game biome plays with the concept of issuing malfunctions for getting hit by some enemies, which, as you can imagine, is a massive incentive to up your dodge game. Learning how to manage malfunctions is a long process of weighing when and if to pick up specific bonuses, and it can make a huge difference on a run. Again, the theme of learning over time comes into play here, and I enjoyed tinkering with my risk profile on each run. Some runs, say when you are off to a bad start, the philosophy just becomes, "Well, I'm going to die anyway, why not roll the dice?" And sometimes, those dice roll in your favor.

Returnal is a delightful immersion for the senses, even if the aspect it's trying to convey is horrifying, lingering dread. It nails it in this regard, and is drenched with both in-your-face monstrosities and lurking terror. Enemy designs are hideous amalgamations of tentacles and teeth, which feel right at home in this bizarre alien hellscape. One of the late-game biomes is incredibly distressing to explore and may even significantly deter some players with thalassophobia.

The soundtrack, primarily composed by Bobby Krlic (*Midsommar*), provides a haunting backdrop that contributes immensely to Returnal's constant and rising sense of trepidation. The unnerving melodies gnaw at the back of your mind long after you set the controller down. One stage in particular hinges on music, and the feeling that you get while climbing up to the boss as the sound gets louder and louder exudes cacophonic anxiety. Feedback from the DualSense controller is a nice touch to the overall ensemble, providing nuance from the tiniest droplet of rain to the impact of a titanic monster crashing into you at high speed.

Returnal is a relentless nightmare that's a dream to play. The journey is full of horror and terrible discoveries, but also unbridled curiosity and wonder. If you have the taste for it, this is an adventure that begs to be experienced. » **Daniel Tack**

Before Your Eyes

An eye-opening experience

8.5

PC

» **Concept**
Relive the memories of a troubled child prodigy by using your actual eyes to blink forward in time

» **Graphics**
The visuals trade realism for colorful stylization, and it's fitting for the dream-like premise

» **Sound**
The voice performances are excellent, and made me grow attached to the small cast faster than expected

» **Playability**
Provided your webcam works, the blinking mechanic works great and is used ingeniously during certain moments. Playing with a mouse works fine but doesn't capture the same magic

» **Entertainment**
Before Your Eyes is much more than a neat gimmick. It offers a wonderful method of interacting with a touching and impactful story that sticks with you long after the credits roll

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Skybound Games **Developer** GoodbyeWorld Games **Release** April 8 **Rating** NR

Blinking for the first time in Before Your Eyes is a genuinely magical moment. I don't mean hitting a button to close your virtual eyes. Through the power of a webcam, Before Your Eyes tracks when you blink which allows you to progress through a wonderful narrative adventure title from GoodbyeWorld Games. It may seem like a novel gimmick on the surface, but the mechanic is used so inventively that it meaningfully enhances the already powerful storytelling that fans of narrative adventure titles would be mistaken to write it off as a shallow trick.

Players take on the role of Benjamin Brynn, a lost soul who has already passed on. At the beginning of the game, you encounter a canine ferryman who forces you to relive the events of Ben's life, beginning at birth. This is all to impress a being called the Gatekeeper who wants an honest assessment of the kind of person Ben was.

By blinking when prompted, you'll jump days, weeks, and sometimes years forward in Ben's life. I'm impressed by how the game accurately recognizes eye-tracking. I never had an issue where a blink didn't register or my camera needed recalibration. I also never felt disoriented or uncomfortable playing using eye tracking, but those factors will vary by person. On that note, it's good that there's an option to play the entire game using traditional mouse clicks, but I think you'd be doing yourself a major disservice in doing so.

Having played Before Your Eyes twice, once using blinks and the other using the mouse, I think the story loses a fair bit of its magic when playing with solely traditional control inputs. Closing your eyes, then opening them to a brand-new scene creates the awesome sensation that you're reliving a life through an old-school View-Master toy. Ben's memories are fleeting, and the mechanic sells that point perfectly. Yes, I was occasionally disappointed after I blinked involuntarily and advanced the story sooner than I would have liked. However, I didn't mind it for long because I found that doing so lends to the game's dreamlike quality and the sensation that even cherished memories eventually fade – even when we hope that they won't.

Some of my favorite moments involve closing my eyes to better eavesdrop on hushed conversations or so my childhood bestie could leave a heartfelt note embarrassment-free. It's also just more fun to "look and blink" instead of pointing and clicking on objects. Even while playing with your eyes, you still use a mouse for other actions like connecting stars in the night sky to write a cosmic message or to keep in rhythm with a piano tempo. These interactions are largely basic but are still delightful.

No matter how you play, Before Your Eyes' story is a heartfelt tale that got me close to tears at several points. Despite its pleasantly whimsical veneer, the narrative's themes of depression and existentialism hit hard, as does understanding life's meaning from the perspective of a person who, despite having a great family and being born with prodigious gifts, struggles to find personal fulfillment. The writing is earnest and thoughtful, and the story takes some unexpected turns culminating in a bittersweet final message that lands harder than I was prepared for (in a good way).

A great story needs good characters, and Before Your Eyes has that in spades. Ben's parents, a caring-yet-demanding mother and a lovably goofy father, are sweethearts. The same goes for Chloe, your mischievous neighbor who comes off as a genuinely endearing kid you can't help but want to impress and hang out with. I was surprised by how attached I became to the cast in such a short time, but the superb performances and well-written dialogue do their job and ingratiated me to the characters.

Throughout the story you make some choices, but I was disappointed in how little they impact the overall narrative. Don't stress too much over whether to sneak out with your friend or get much-needed sleep for your big piano recital; this is one of those games where you're merely choosing what colors to paint the road as opposed to creating whole new paths. Since the game only takes about an hour or so to complete, it's worth replaying just to see a few of those scenes, but I wish my decisions had more weight given the large number of choices presented.

Before Your Eyes' story left me reeling by the end, and it's a memorable journey worth going out of your way to play. You rarely get a lot of first-of-a-kind experiences in games anymore, and Before Your Eyes largely nails the execution of its primary hook. It's a concept I'd love to see further explored in a follow-up, and I couldn't be happier that something like this exists.

» **Marcus Stewart**

Resident Evil Village

Painting the ghost town red

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** May 7 **Rating** M

Not all monsters hide in the shadows. Ethan Winters discovers this within minutes of setting foot in this isolated village at the foot of a medieval castle. The sun has barely burned off the morning mist when ravenous, fang-toothed horrors attack him. Resident Evil Village's opening hour establishes an incredibly tense tone, weaving together moody, atmospheric horror with rollercoaster firefights that leave Ethan within an inch of his life. And, like an ultramarathon runner, Village maintains this thrilling pace until its closing credits.

Ethan's journey forces him to explore a ramshackle shantytown, blood-soaked wine cellars, and a creepy mansion littered with animated porcelain dolls. These locales are perfect backdrops for a series of blood-curdling encounters. My stomach lurched as a deformed baby-like mutation chased me through a dimly lit basement, and I had to stop and catch my breath after a harrowing shootout with a snarling truck-sized hound. Village's environment and enemy design are superb, making it one of the scariest Resident Evil games to date.

Ethan slowly amasses the usual assortment of shotguns, pistols, and grenade launchers to combat this assortment of otherworldly horrors. Village's arsenal doesn't hold many surprises, but the overall gunplay is more polished than what we had in its predecessor. Running from Village's slow-marching enemies isn't difficult, but navigating their flurry of fangs is still a thrill. Staying calm long enough to line up a series of headshots while these hordes bear down on your position is the true challenge, and I walked away from most encounters with a rush of adrenaline. A handful of other adversaries – such as meme mistress Lady Dimitrescu – relentlessly hound Ethan throughout the game, much like RE2 Remake's Mr. X. You never know when one of these villains will stroll around a corner, which creates a palpable tension, but these sequences always eventually resolve in an epic, resource-draining boss battle.

When I wasn't battling tooth and claw for my life, I was scanning every room from floor to ceiling, looking for more ammo, healing items, and other valuable tools. Like other recent Resident Evil games, Village's map does a stellar job communicating which rooms have been cleared out and which still contain a few hidden treasures. However, some items are better hidden than others. On the one hand, Village encouraged me to pour over its intricately detailed environments with a fine-toothed comb; I enjoyed most of these scavenger hunts, and checking a room off my map was always satisfying. On the other hand, a few items remained stubbornly hidden even after several minutes of scouring, so trying to find every item in every room became a little tedious. Fortunately, even a cursory search of each room yields enough gear to get you through the trials ahead.

Developing a keen eye for detail is also vital to solving Village's handful of environmental puzzles. I loved how these challenges offered a much-needed tension release, and most left me feeling clever. Unfortunately, a couple solutions are obscured by fuzzy logic. For example, I had to brute force my way through one that involved rotating statues, because its clues were misleading. Even after I'd stumbled into the solution, it still took me a while to work out the underlying logic. Fortunately, Village doesn't throw many puzzles your way, and most of them are satisfyingly simple, so speedbumps are rare.

Resident Evil Village's narrative is more compelling than I expected. Ethan is still a bit of a bland everyman, but his journey to rescue his daughter is full of wild characters and a handful of surprising moments. Village's narrative was never the main thing driving me forward, but I'm glad to see Capcom actually put thought into this world, and a few of the late game twists have me genuinely excited to see where the series goes next.

Resident Evil Village is an impressive package. I loved the recent remakes of Resident Evil 2 and 3, but I'm excited to see Capcom push the series forward again. Village expands on Resident Evil 7: Biohazard's approach to first-person combat, offering a series of white-knuckle encounters that perfectly complement the unnerving environmental design. Thankfully, Village's amplified action doesn't diminish its horror. If anything, it maintains a sense of dread that few games can match. If you have the intestinal fortitude for intense terror, playing Resident Evil Village is a great way to check your pulse. » **Ben Reeves**

9.25

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Resident Evil 7: Biohazard protagonist Ethan Winters travels to a remote village hoping to rescue his kidnapped daughter, only to come face-to-face with a new breed of flesh-hungry monsters

» **Graphics**
From decrepit barns to ornate castle dining halls, Village's jaw-dropping backdrops are a stunning showpiece for the newest generation of consoles

» **Sound**
Capcom's haunting soundtrack gets the blood pumping, and the voiceover is solid, but Ethan constantly seems out of breath, which is a bit annoying

» **Playability**
Expect a slow-paced shooter, but the tension remains incredibly high, and the gunplay feels great

» **Entertainment**
Village doesn't pull any punches when it comes to horror, but a consistent rollout of new weapons and tools makes it hard to walk away from these terrors

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Nier Replicant Ver.1.22474487139...

New blood, old veins

8.25

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Toylogic **Release** April 23 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Fight alongside a band of oddball heroes to save your sister (and maybe even the world) from a relentless plague

» **Graphics**
The protagonist and his friends look stellar in cutscenes, but in-game environments and NPCs are disappointingly drab

» **Sound**
Vocalist Emi Evan's masterful usage of "chaos language" – a blend of two or more languages (in this case, Japanese, English, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French, and Scottish Gaelic) – creates strikingly unique melodies unlike anything you've ever heard before

» **Playability**
Combat is supremely satisfying because the controls are easy to pick up, and the auto-sprint is a nice touch

» **Entertainment**
You'll spend most of your time going from point A to point B collecting materials for forgettable NPCs, but the main questline will keep you on the edge of your seat

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Nier Replicant's bleak world is over a decade old (the original Nier released in 2010), and yet its morbid commentary on human frailty still resonates. This bittersweet narrative is supported by enhanced character models, satisfying hack-and-slash mechanics, and a haunting soundtrack that spins a riveting tale of its own. At the same time, outdated features that made the original game tedious to play remain present, and that's because Nier Replicant is neither a remake nor remaster of that 2010 title. Creative director Yoko Taro prefers the term "version upgrade," and this moniker fits perfectly – for better and for worse.

Fans will immediately notice Nier: Automata's influence; Replicant's combat is simple and flashy. A new lock-on camera makes parries and evasive maneuvers much easier to perform, but light and heavy attacks remain your bread and butter. Chaining combos with an array of different weapons or executing incapacitated foes emerge as the fastest ways to win engagements. Fancy animations, like midair twirls and slow-motion ground slams, made the melee action feel exciting enough for me to actively seek out clusters of adversaries of my own volition.

A repertoire of dazzling magic truly brings these barren battlefields to life. You can equip two abilities at any given time, so experimentation is key. I usually paired Dark Whirlwind – which conjures spinning, crimson blades to deal AoE damage – with Dark Blast's rapid-fire bullets so I could always stay on the offensive. You can also give commands to your companions, but other than outright ordering them to disengage from time to time, I never noticed any changes in their behavior.

You need these mystical powers to survive because the world is dying. Small settlements dot the countryside where umbral monsters called "shades" rove in packs. What's more, a mysterious disease is slowly eating away the last vestiges of civilization. The withering state of humanity is far more personal for you than anyone else: Yonah, your little sister, is slowly succumbing to a plague called the Black Scrawl. Strange runes continue to spread across her flesh as you venture into the wilds to find a cure. But you're never alone. A floating tome named Grimoire Weiss, a kind-hearted boy named Emil, and a foul-mouthed, scantily clad warrior named Kainé accompany you throughout the far reaches of the continent. Together, you brave sandstorms, dash along the beaches of seaside towns, and scour spooky mansions to save Yonah. Hard-hitting story beats like generational trauma and the cycle of hatred offer thrilling surprises that left me in emotional shambles on multiple occasions.

I loved Nier Replicant's quirky cast, and this extends beyond the main crew. Conversations that you strike up with characters are filled to the brim with profound, albeit campy, sentiments. Side missions give narrative flavor to an otherwise bland game world, but I wish these tasks had more variance as most amount to forgettable fetch quests. Additionally, in contrast to your gorgeously realized party members, all the NPCs are poorly textured. Because of this, the emotional stakes and resolutions of side missions fall flat. It's hard to relate to a character when their facial features are practically indiscernible.

Shades are the most common enemy you encounter during your travels. They strike in mobs, but don't be fooled by their numbers; they're pushovers, save for the high-tier damage sponges that spawn in the late game. Shade attacks are considerably easy to anticipate and counter, making their constant ambushes more annoying than anything else. Boss fights, however, are fun sequences that push your mechanical skills to the limit, forcing you to quickly react to a flurry of magical and physical attacks – often at the same time. Atmospheric choruses coupled with the visual smorgasbord of blood and sword-sparks makes each of these tense confrontations memorable.

It's too bad that strengthening your equipment to comfortably clear these battles is less enjoyable. Combat mods, called Words, drop from slain shades and can be slotted into weapons or magic abilities for permanent buffs. You can also collect raw materials scattered throughout each location and exchange them for upgrades. Both options (especially the latter) require hours of monotonous grinding, backtracking, and luck. At one point, I spent close to five hours in one location trying to collect enough "Eagle Eggs" to level up my favorite one-handed sword and spear. Harsh random number generators are common in RPGs, but Nier Replicant's implementation makes for a frustrating exploration loop.

Despite some dated shortcomings, this "version upgrade" is more than the sum of its parts. Novel design choices like camera and genre shifts are as impressive today as they were more than 10 years ago. The main characters are dynamic with their own interesting backstories, and the plot is as deliciously devastating as you'd expect. Nier Replicant might not convert players that were turned off by the original or Automata, but there are more than enough quality-of-life updates and story-centric nuances to keep longtime fans and new initiates coming back for subsequent playthroughs.

» **Jason Guisao**

Oddworld: Soulstorm

A bad batch of brew

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Oddworld Inhabitants **Developer** Oddworld Inhabitants **Release** April 6 **Rating** T

Playing Oddworld: Soulstorm is as arduous as Abe's quest to liberate his Mudoken brethren from slavery. Each step is a supreme test of patience as you methodically guide your followers through challenging hazards, sweating over the fact that one slip-up could unravel all your effort. If you enjoy putting up with that old-school challenge, you might appreciate this journey. However, if you're a newcomer or a fan that believes this style of platformer hasn't aged very well, turn back now. Soulstorm doesn't do enough to modernize the series' tedious gameplay, and a litany of severe technical hiccups spoil Abe's attempted comeback.

A reimagining of Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus, released in 1998, Soulstorm's gameplay remains largely the same: you recruit and guide followers through 2D platforming stages littered with dangers. As charming as the classic Oddworld games are, they can be frustratingly difficult and that hasn't changed much in Soulstorm. Most Slig enemies and other hazards mow Abe down instantly, and I was infuriated by how little wiggle room I had to correct course when things went sideways. Abe drops so fast that it makes the health meter seem like a cruel tease. While playing Soulstorm, I often felt like I was walking on eggshells because of that high price of failure. Retracing every step, re-recruiting every Mudokon, and carefully guiding them through a gauntlet of foes is soul-crushing when it all falls apart in seconds. Dying to unexpected perils, like being suddenly gunned down by off-screen enemies, feels cheap and happens way too often.

A crafting system serves as Soulstorm's biggest addition, but it doesn't feel necessary. You must repeatedly gather the same ingredients every time you die (by searching lockers, trash cans, and fallen foes), which wore me down after repeatedly replaying certain sections. The crafted tools themselves, like proximity mines, smoke screens, even a flamethrower, add a welcomed element of flexibility and improvisation to gameplay. Dropping smoke screens to create hiding spots anywhere is nice, but I wished I didn't have to make these items myself and grew tired of digging around the same spots over and over.

Even when Soulstorm's difficulty eases up, the gameplay is bland. The action feels largely the same from previous games in the series, and that formula doesn't evolve significantly beyond the first few hours. Even the more interesting sequences, like facing down a giant mech aboard a speeding train, are far too punishing to be fun. I'm glad that Abe controls better now (he even has a double jump), but inputs still have a mushy unresponsiveness that makes entertaining actions, like possessing Sligs, feel like a hassle. The controls also lead to additional deaths because Abe doesn't act as swiftly as you need him to, especially during the ill-fitting, overly demanding combat arenas that pit you against waves of baddies while you try to protect fleeing Mudokens.

Soulstorm would be a tough recommendation for anyone outside of diehard fans, but I encountered several progress-sabotaging bugs (even after installing the big day-one patch) that should scare off even those players. When I died, Mudokens sometimes failed to respawn alongside me even though my tally indicated they were still alive and under my command. That meant I lost out on turning in followers that I'd spent ages trying to safely liberate, which negatively affected my overall quarma – a vital metric in determining which of the four endings you get.

To make matters worse, Abe occasionally gets stuck in environmental geometry, forcing a restart. At one point, I fell into an infinite loop. A gun in a late-game turret sequence failed to shoot despite working fine in previous segments. I spent over an hour trying to lead a large group of followers through a particularly challenging area, but once I opened the exit door, an invisible wall prevented me from moving forward. I was forced to restart this entire, lengthy sequence twice before the exit worked properly. Soulstorm's gameplay pushed my patience to its limits, but these bugs sent me over the edge and made me nervous every time I started a new level.

Soulstorm's faults are a shame because its narrative and presentation brought a smile to my face. Abe and his pals are goofy, delightful underdogs I couldn't help but root for. The enjoyable story is packed with heart, and the cutscenes look great. I wanted to welcome Abe into a new generation of gaming with open arms, but Soulstorm fails to make a case for why its brand of cinematic platforming works today. Soulstorm only reaffirms that Abe's past adventures are best viewed with rose-colored glasses. » **Marcus Stewart**

5

PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Help Abe liberate his fellow Mudokons from Glukkon tyranny while unraveling his own destiny

» **Graphics**
The CG cutscenes look great, and I love seeing the camera pan out while dozens of Mudokons scurry in the background

» **Sound**
The voice acting remains charming and humorous, but the soundtrack is unremarkable

» **Playability**
The platforming feels much better when compared to New 'n' Tasty, but the controls are still stiff and clunky and can cost you your life against the quick-drawing enemies

» **Entertainment**
Soulstorm has oodles of charm, but tedious design and annoying bugs make an experience that only the most hardcore and forgiving of Oddworld fans might enjoy

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

7.75 Narita Boy

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release March 30 **Rating** T

As much as I didn't like gingerly hopping across platforms and would yell "come on!" after failing another difficult combat arena, I couldn't help but fall in love with Narita Boy's style once the dust settled. I love every inch of its wonderfully designed world, and the gameplay is good enough to carry the adventure.
– Marcus Stewart

7.5 Pac-Man 99

Platform Switch **Release** April 7 **Rating** E

To enjoy Pac-Man 99, I had to accept the frustrations that came with learning its systems. While it does an embarrassingly poor job of explaining the hows-and-whys of its mechanics, once you figure them out on your own, it's a good way to fill lulls in your day. – Blake Hester

7.75 Lost Words: Beyond The Page

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • Stadia • PC
Release April 6 **Rating** E

Lost Words: Beyond The Page affected me more than most games do, but it's not always engaging to play. In the end, the touching story wins out over the flaws, but be prepared for an inconsistent experience.
– Kimberley Wallace

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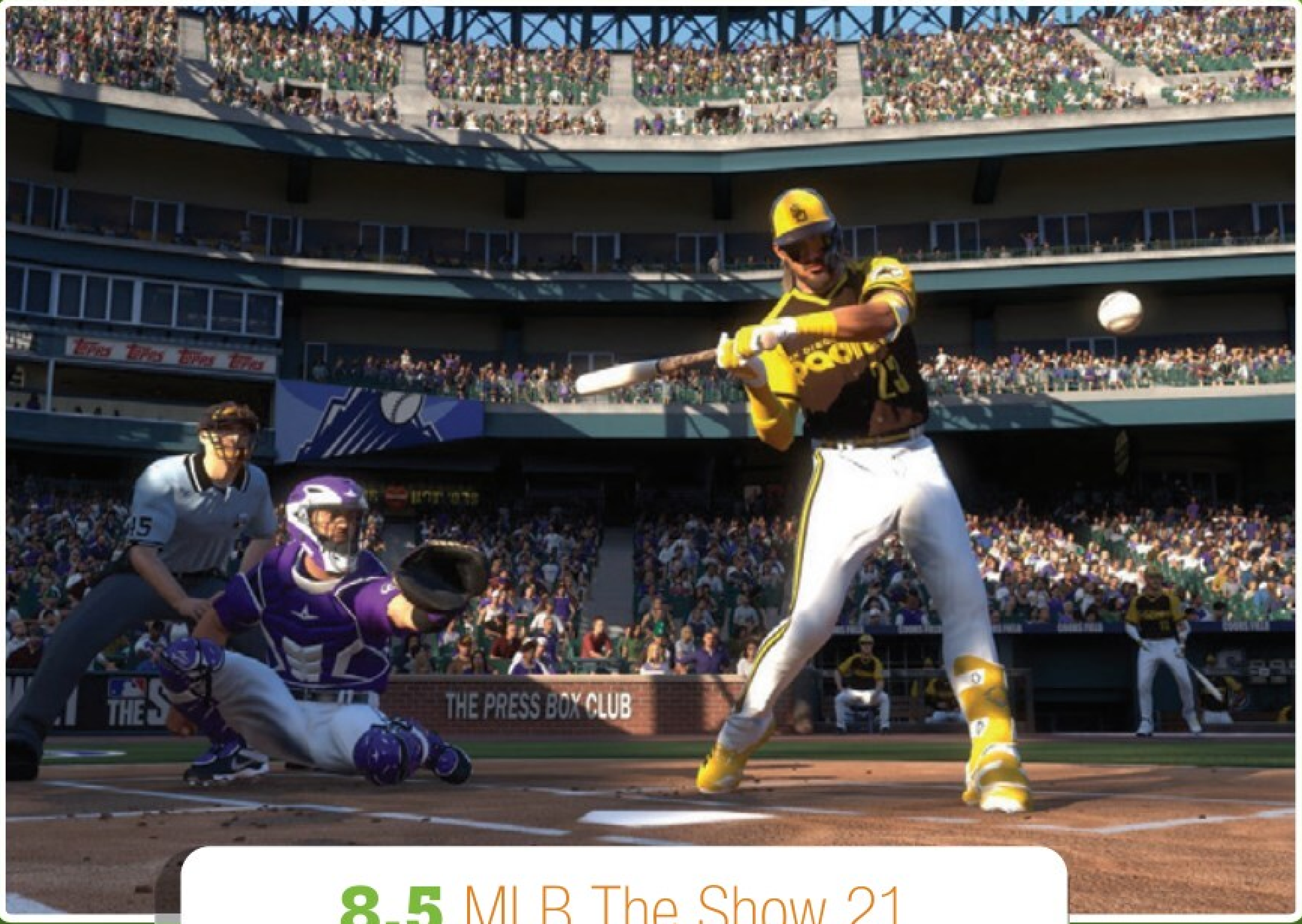

8.5 MLB The Show 21

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One
Release April 20 **Rating** E

MLB The Show 21 lacks flash and new experiential paths this season, but continues to improve on the field and beneath the hood, giving an entirely new audience of players a hell of a game to begin their baseball careers with. – Andrew Reiner

Our next issue launches digitally on 6/22

with the print issue to follow

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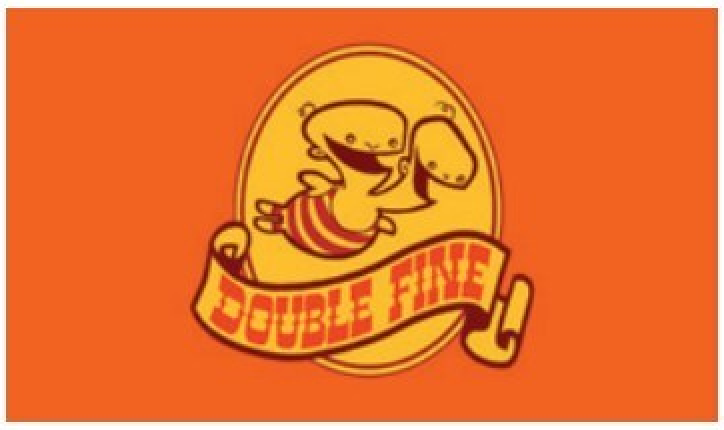
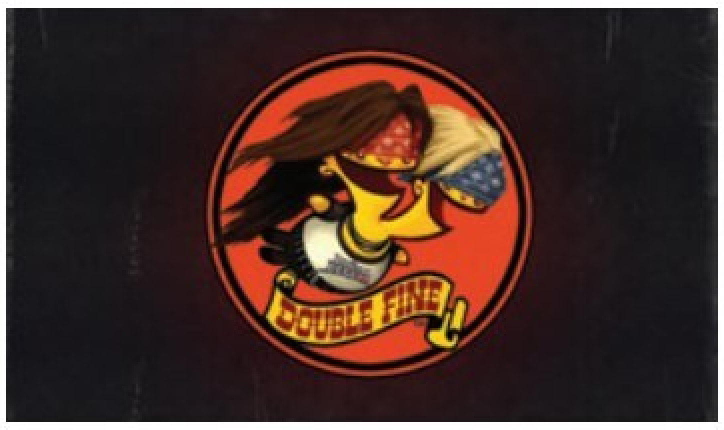
The Many Logos Of Double Fine

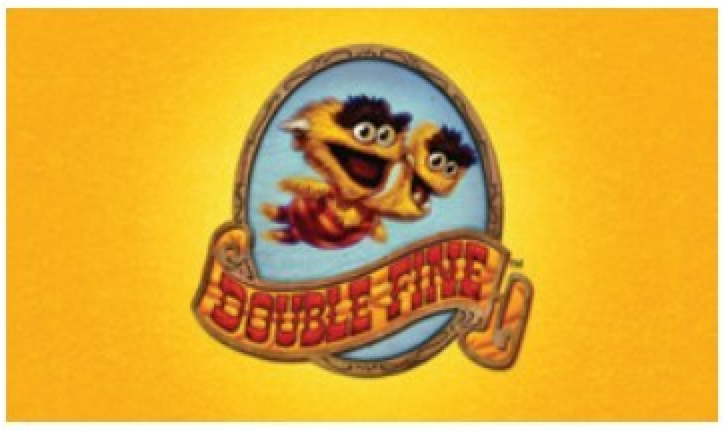
For almost every game in its 20-year history, Double Fine has remixed its logo (affectionately referred to as THB, or Two-Headed Baby). Coincidentally, according to Double Fine director of marketing and communication James Spafford, the only exceptions to this rule are Psychonauts 1 and 2, which use the studio's original logo. To wrap our Double Fine coverage this issue, we collected a few of our favorite renditions the company has released over the years, giving a quick look at its 20-year visual history. ***by Blake Hester***



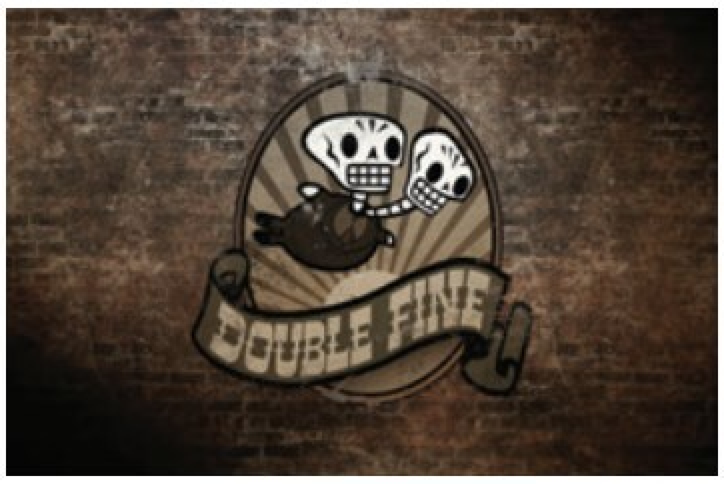
Psychonauts: The classics never go out of style. Though it's received many renditions over the years, the original Double Fine logo is still an iconic introduction to the studio's first cult classic.



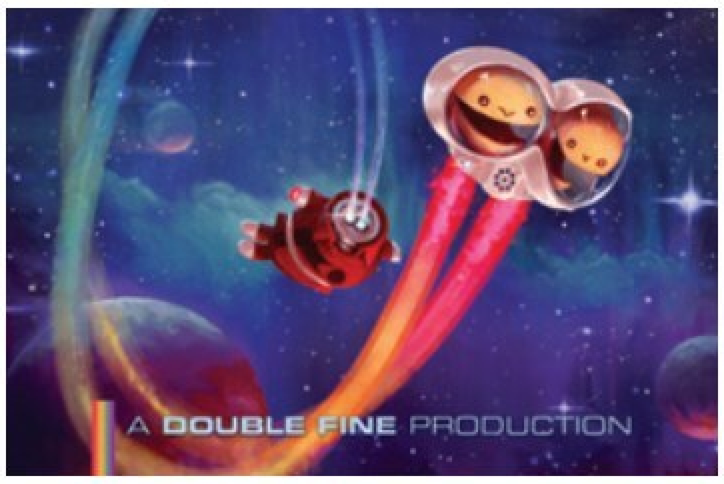
Brütal Legend: One of the earliest examples of Double Fine changing up its logo, the Brütal Legend remix features THB as the world's cutest metal-heads.



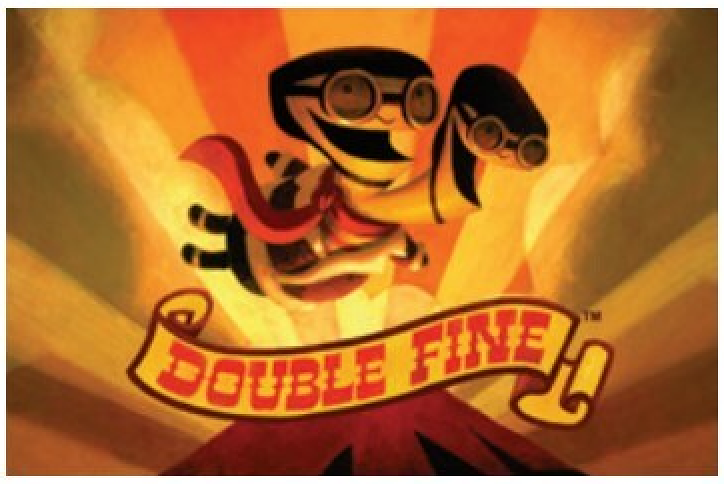
Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster: The only licensed game Double Fine has developed, this logo reimagines THB as if it were created by Jim Henson.



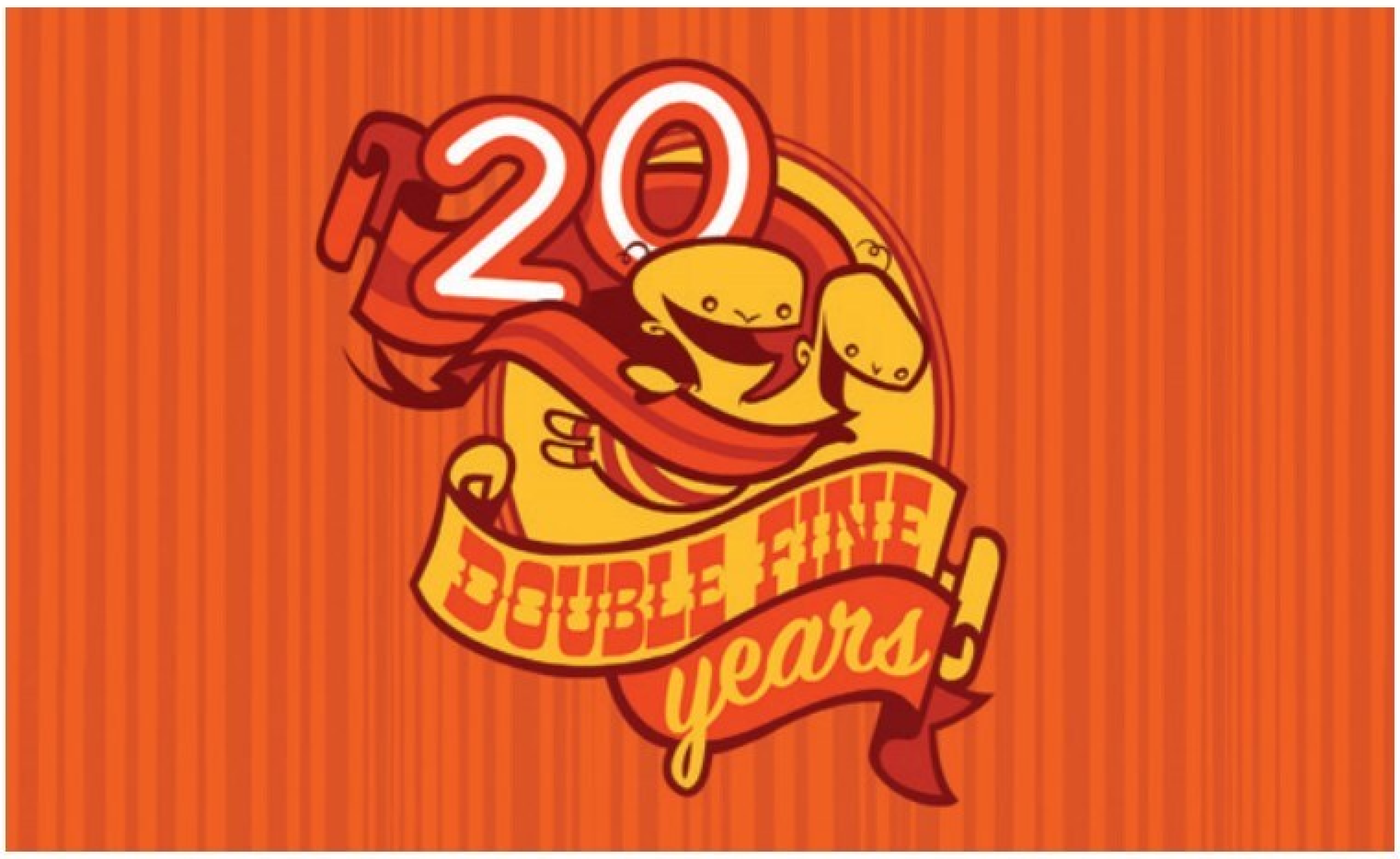
Grim Fandango Remastered: Tim Schafer returns to his roots. The logo for Grim Fandango Remastered takes its inspiration from Mexico's Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, which also served as one of the primary inspirations for Grim Fandango.



Headlander: Fittingly for Headlander, a game set in the space-age, Double Fine sent THB beyond the reaches of Earth – with a detachable head, no less!



Broken Age: Other than the original, Broken Age's THB might be one of Double Fine's most recognizable logos, as it opened every single episode of the studio's landmark documentary series, Double Fine Adventure.



20th Anniversary Logo: Finally, to celebrate two decades of Double Fine, the studio took its logo back to the beginning. THB is largely how it was in Psychonauts, but with the added flair announcing Double Fine's milestone. ◆

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